THE TOWER

Issue 18

THE TOWER

Art and Literary Magazine

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The Tower
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Printed by Versa Press, Inc., East Peoria, IL

Cover Art: *Doggy Dreams,* L. H. Cheung, acrylic on canvas

The Tower is the art and literary magazine of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. We publish the best in art and creative writing by undergraduate students in the state of Minnesota.

We would like to thank the following organizations for their generosity and support:

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Letter from the Editors in Chief

From the whispers of dreams shared among friends to the chilling specters of nightmares that haunt the depths of our minds, we find ourselves tethered by the intangible forces that shape our thoughts and actions. This year, in our 2024 edition, "Dreams and Visions," The Tower embarks on a journey into the collective unconscious of the human experience.

"Dreams and Visions" serves as a conduit for individuals to pour forth their hopes, loves, losses, idiosyncrasies, and stories, as well as the echoes of recurring memories. Composed of viewpoints, memories, and the echoes of lost hopes, each contribution offers a distinct glimpse into the labyrinth of the human psyche. As you peruse these pages, we invite you to join us on a voyage of self-discovery and exploration.

Within the pages of this edition, our dedicated staff has endeavored to unearth the outliers, the visionaries, the wordsmiths, the musicians, and all those courageous souls who open their hearts to share their otherworldly odysseys. Unlike previous years, The Tower extended its invitation to the entirety of Minnesota's institutions of higher learning, seeking those who embrace the exploration of consciousness, the unconscious, and the vast expanse of the human journey.

For in this edition, there are no splits, no limitations, no boundaries. There is only the endless expanse of human potential, waiting to be discovered and embraced. So let us journey together, into the unknown, and see where the currents of dreams and visions may take us.

Sincerely,

Simon Harms

Kendall Gabos

The Tower Staff

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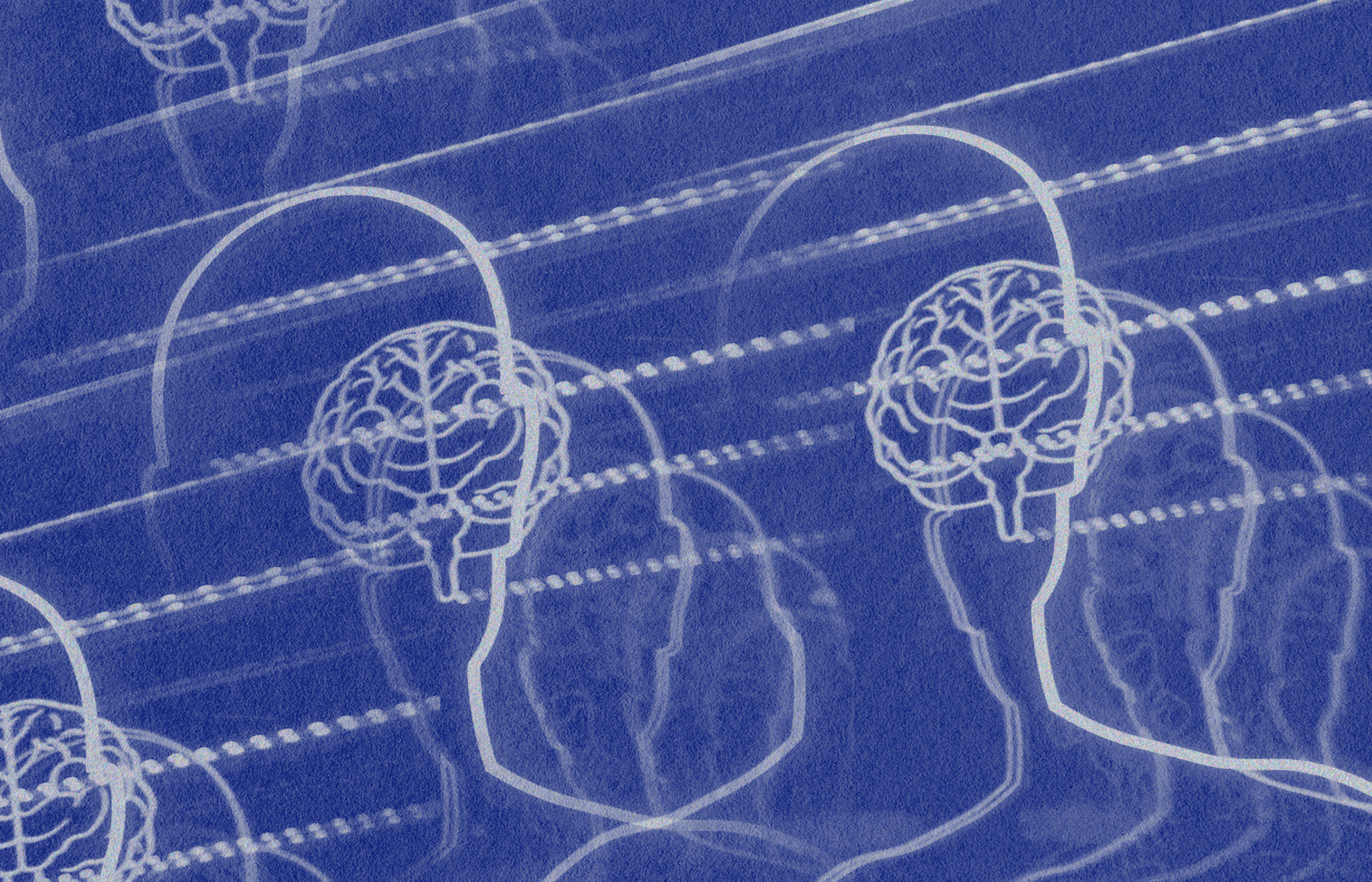

WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS SAY?

Bianca Llerena

Last night I dreamt, that
down by the abandoned
car manufacturer building,
past the schoolhouse
and barn,
I stumbled upon
a family
of flies
eating away at a body that
looked like yours.
It was colorful in a
putrid way
(like when you hear cries for
help in a foreign language);
your eyes were carved out,
and your breasts were
already half gone.
I found a red wheelbarrow
at the barn and
lifted you inside,
and because most of
your fingers were still there,
I held your hand as
I brought you home.

Growing Pains, Madison Schaufler

21

Keng Xiong

everything came in twos,

like field trip money
and school lunches,

like twin-size beds we
pushed together

at seven, your elbow draped over my ear,
your knee jutting into my ribs,

coupled stars set for morning
lost in between crepuscule-purple

until eventually,
the bunk bed we shared

at sixteen, awake at night with our
telepathy,
pretending we weren't scared

of growing up the way we grew
out of matching t-shirts.

*

everything came into view,

the dappled city lights of St. Paul
when you were driving

at twenty, and I began writing
for the first time since we left Milwaukee

you are a past life
I feel more

and more
each day,

I read aloud to you
at 11:59 p.m.

the windows rolled down
trailing pine trees and gasoline

and you laughed,
the kind I understood

that meant I wasn't making any sense,
and I smiled, the way you knew that
meant

I'd still keep the words in pages, let it stay
in ivory-colored ink,

because maybe I would
on the drive home,

past the rest stop
and fading fireflies,

find some meaning beyond
in the headlights

and radio songs, soft and delicate,
the way twenty-one years

with you
weighs so heavy,

even now, midnight,
gone

are starry summer skies,
the sun slowly

mourning.

Untitled Expanse

Lazslo Jentes

here at the deathbed of summer
cold shroud creeping up from dimming feet
i am yearning for the mountains

to be landslide
with vastness on my heels
to be divide
split crags sculpting clouds
to be bedrock
dreaming the loud world

i wish to have this all made small
a postcard
in one hand.

Conference of the Birds, Ekhlas Abdullahi

Illusory

Martha LaBine

I was a lifeless blue,
a borderline gray,
and your love was a street lamp:
never warm,
but succeeding in appearing that way.

Imago

Christian Ash

The cicadas emerged in late May after seventeen years underground. Orange and black—some as long as your thumb and at least as thick—they commandeered the elms, screaming and fornicating in the copses around the park at all hours, generating a deafening barrage of white noise that never ceased. You couldn't sleep. They drove Crazy Bill mad, and on one early morning near the end of the month, a state trooper found him stumbling drunkenly through the tallgrass, blabbering and hallucinating God knows what, spraying the treeline with kerosene. The trooper cuffed him on the spot, drove him down to the station, whereupon opening the backseat door found the wizened man sleeping like a newborn. He let him crash out on a cot in the holding cell for a full day and a half before waking and bringing him back to the park, so the story goes.

By July they were all dead, their brittle corpses speckling the yellowed zoysia like pepper on scrambled eggs. They lay in the fire pits, empty Pepsi cans, the hair of a weathered Barbie doll half buried in the dirt. The Canter dogs, Rutgers and Pony, at first did not know what to make of them, and stood firm, yelping like hell at the lifeless bodies, but soon their fear turned to curiosity. Their noses descended, flared rapidly. They ate them until they were sick, then ate some more. The weed-strewn softball field now became a marketplace: the youngest made necklaces and spires from the spoils of their trades while their brothers killed the carrier in the outfield and their sisters played hand games in the dugout. At night you could hear your own heart beating.

Maven Perry lived with her father and half-sister at the end of the park, not thirty paces from the treeline Crazy Bill had tried to ignite. When the copse exhaled through its wooden teeth, blowing Dum-Dums wrappers and taraxacum seeds toward her prism of a home, she could just make out the oily scent of kerosene. Coupled with the stench of her father's cigarettes—which he smoked on the

paint-stripped porch in the early mornings before leaving for his route and left smoldering in a plastic ashtray on the railing—the air seemed laced with something grotesque and foreboding. She looked to the trees, branches oscillating in the parched wind. The spade-shaped leaves had turned rusty at the edges. The tallgrass looked like tinder.

She first saw the wraith on the way home from chapel from the passenger seat of her father's pickup. The engine kept a dull hum as they glided along the outstretched pavement, a mirage of black water receding before them. Window down, the farmscape seemed a diorama, too still to be real. The cattle stood like figurines; the soybean fields seemed painted. In the distance, near the road, laid an empty acre separated from the others as if by scalpel, and there, at its center, stood the figure. She watched it with vague curiosity, first believing it to be an odd-looking scarecrow, but as the truck approached, she glimpsed its shrouded body in full. Darkness concealed its features, yet she knew it met her gaze. Once they passed, she stuck her head out the window and looked back. She thought it turned ever so slightly toward her.

In the home that night she grew restless. Her half-sister rolled beside her, pulling the sheet away and exposing Maven's leg to the warm air. She fixated on the ceiling, taking in the water stain she had become so familiar with, barely visible in the dark. Her mind subconsciously worked to see an image in its nebulous shape: a flame, a tree, a woman wearing a cloak. It was with this last formation that she remembered the wraith, and then no matter how hard she tried, she could not see it as anything else. She turned toward her half-sister. Her ears rang in the silence.

"Deirdre," she whispered. "Are you still awake?"

Deirdre's voice was muffled by the pillow.

"No."

"Do you remember earlier today, when we passed that scarecrow on the way back from chapel?"

"No."

"It was on a patch of dirt by the road."

Deirdre said nothing.

"It was all dressed in black like a grim reaper. Did you see it?"

Deirdre rolled back to look at her. "What are you talking about?"

"The scarecrow. On the way back from chapel. Did you see it?"

"I didn't see no scarecrow."

"Were you looking out the window?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You think so?"

"Maven, I didn't see no scarecrow. Now let me go to sleep."

She held eye contact until Deirdre turned her back. Soon afterward came soft, rhythmic snoring, and it was to this sound that Maven finally drifted to sleep several long minutes later. She dreamt of corn stalks crawling with shiny black spiders.

The next time she saw the wraith was later that week, at the annual county festival. She and Deirdre spent the day there, wandering the trampled field and its bustling ecosystem of tents and stalls with the other park kids. The two had bought a stick of cotton candy with a dollar Deirdre found under a picnic table, and the younger park children swarmed around them, begging and jealous. They ate slowly. Deirdre made a show of each bite, licking her fingers to rile them up.

Maven took the last bit of cotton candy, compressing it with her fingers before popping it into her mouth. She let it rest on her tongue, feeling it tickle as it dissolved. Then, a bottle rocket cracked somewhere behind her, and she turned to see a group of older boys jeering and lighting another. The youngers, now without any candy to hope for, abandoned her and Deirdre to watch, and met the next explosion with a round of cheers and cries.

"Let's go see the fireworks," said Deirdre, tugging on Maven's wrist.

Maven followed for a few steps but froze when her eyes caught sight of something.

"Come on," said Deridre, still gripping her half-sister. "What's the hold up?"

The wraith stood at the edge of the field, still and shrouded. The sun moved out from behind a cloud, and Maven felt its heat on her forehead. The sugar turned to stone in her mouth.

"What are you looking at?"

Maven pointed at the wraith. It seemed to wobble in the haze. She squinted from the brightness and immediately felt lightheaded and tired.

"What are you pointing at? There's nothing over there."

"It's the scarecrow. From Sunday."

"Stop foolin'. There's no scarecrow over there."

Maven shielded her eyes from the sun for a better look. The wraith faced her, its black cloak concealing all detail. Another rocket whistled through the air and exploded, followed by a round of shouting.

"Come on, May." Deirdre tugged on her half-sister's wrist once more but made no progress. "We're missing it!"

"You really don't see it?" Maven kept her eyes on the wraith, unable to turn away.

"I don't see nothing. Now let's go!"

It was the wraith who moved first, turning its back to Maven and disappearing into a field of emerald corn stalks. Something in her stomach shifted, and the sweetness in her mouth grew

sour. She spat the pink rock into the grass as Deirdre pulled her away.

She awoke the next morning in an instant, as if someone had snapped their fingers under her nose. The first thing she saw was the water stain above her, though she averted her gaze the instant she recognized it. Deirdre was fast asleep, her regular inhales and exhales the only sounds above silence. The sheets were damp and cool from sweat, and Maven's throat felt like a desert. She arose and stepped out into the living space. Her father was already gone, his pillow and blanket left neatly on the couch, toothbrush and loose cigarettes resting on the coffee table beside. She retrieved a clean-looking glass from the sink and poured herself the last of the cranberry juice. On the counter was an old newspaper, the cartoon section separated from the rest, a gift her father left for her every morning, and she brought this with her as she stepped out onto the porch and into the morning light. The sky was clear, with nothing to obstruct the sun's cruel gaze. She shielded her eyes from the glare and felt its soft heat on her skin. At first, she did not notice it and laid out the paper on the balustrade as she always did, sipping her cranberry juice and reading the comics to the sound of the breeze. But when she looked up, there it was, standing at the treeline, half obscured by the tallgrass. Her stomach dropped. Up close, she could make out the rips in its cloak, strands of dark fabric hanging by the threads, but its face remained under shadow. She wondered if anyone was in there.

She fought to find her voice. "I'm not afraid of you."

The wraith stood still. It didn't even seem to breathe.

Maven felt her heartbeat quicken. "What do you want?"

The tallgrass swayed in the wind. All dried out, the rustling sounded like a mother shushing a baby to sleep.

Maven felt her eyes well up against her will. With her free hand, she picked up her father's ashtray and threw it at the figure. "Stop following me!"

It hit the ground and toppled end over end before coming to rest in front of the tallgrass, a few feet before the figure, leaving a trail of bent cigarette filters back to the porch. Rutgers and Pony, three homes down, rose from their stupors and growled toward the commotion. The wraith did nothing.

"I said go away!" Maven set down her glass and marched down the porch steps but did not advance farther. Instead, she picked up a bottle by the neck and threw it as hard as she could toward the figure. It spun in midair, emitting a spray of old beer and whistling a low note as it flew toward the wraith. It did not collide with it but instead went straight through the black fabric and whatever was underneath without influence. It hit the trunk of an elm and shattered. Maven froze, and then came the fear. She turned and ran back into the home and to her half sister, still asleep.

She shook Deirdre awake.

Deirdre gripped her pillow. "May? What are you doing?"

Maven stripped away the sheet, gripped her sister by the elbows, and pulled her out of bed. She all but dragged her out onto the porch and into the sun. But the wraith was gone.

"What's going on? What happened?"

Maven stared at the treeline. Nothing. Not a trace.

"This better not be about that stupid scarecrow you keep seeing."

A warm gust swept through the copse, rustling the leaves and the tallgrass. The air smelled faintly of kerosene.

Maven felt the breeze on her face. "It was right here. I swear."

"Liar. You're just trying to prank me. Like the boogeyman. You keep talking about some scarecrow, how only you can see it, and then you're just gonna go and scare me with a—"

Maven peered through the copse. The elms stood like wooden statues, almost human in their poses. They seemed to be watching her, somehow, waiting for her to make a move.

"May—"

For a moment she thought she saw movement, a shift somewhere deep within the trees, but then there was nothing. All was quiet.

"Maven!"

She turned toward Deirdre. "What?"

Deirdre pointed at her. "You're bleeding."

Maven looked down at her shirt and found a large red stain over her abdomen. She panicked and pulled up the fabric to see the wound underneath, but her skin was unharmed.

"Oh," said Deirdre. "You must have spilled something."

Maven looked to where her glass was resting on the balustrade, still half full. The red liquid distorted the trees beyond it, stretching and contorting their trunks like a funhouse mirror.

"Why is Dad's ashtray over there?"

Maven started to respond but could not find the words.

"I'm going back to bed. You better not wake me up again or I'll tell on you."

Maven kept her focus on the glass and its contents. She could almost see her reflection in it, a distorted twin among the twisted branches, staring back. She heard Deirdre's footfalls as she retreated into the home, and soon afterward Maven followed, curling up next to her half-sister and drifting into an uncomfortable slumber.

When she rose again, there was lingering fear and an odd feeling that she wasn't quite sure where she was. She couldn't tell how long she had slept, and part of her wondered if the previous episode had been a dream. Sunlight fell through the window, drawing thick golden lines in the dusty air. Maven sat up in a groggy daze and noticed Deirdre had left the bed, a spot drool still visible on her pillowcase.

She set her bare feet on the hardwood and stood, her vision going blurry and her thoughts receding as the blood rushed from her head. The

home was silent, and hot. Still a bit dizzy, she stepped out of the bedroom, but her half-sister was not in the kitchen or by the couch.

"Deirdre?"

Nothing. Something felt wrong, but it was only when she inhaled the dusty air that she discovered what it was—smoke.

She raised her voice. "Deirdre?"

A fury of barking outside. Then, the unmistakable scream of a child, drawn out. Maven rushed out onto the porch and was hit with a wave of heat and cruel light. Before her, the copse was ablaze. Flames stretched to the treetops, flickering and wavering in the wind. Her instincts failed her. She stood frozen and terrified, entranced by the conflagration.

It was one of the youngers who had screamed, and soon her cries drew out the children and grown-ups alike. A man came out with an extinguisher, but the pale spray did nothing to stop the flames, and he soon retreated in a fit of coughs. Some of the park boys tried to approach the monster, but the heat kept them at bay. Maven came to her senses and scanned the scene for her half-sister. Deirdre was nowhere to be found. She shouted her name, but her voice was drowned out by that of another. Crazy Bill, wrinkled and shirtless, had emerged from his trailer and was now standing only a few paces from the treeline, unfazed by the heat. His wiry arms extended upwards. His voice rang out through the park.

"Lucifer!" he shouted. "Lucifer! Lucifer!"

Maven fell to her knees. Her tears seemed to evaporate as soon as they formed.

"Lucifer has returned!"

The wind shifted, and burning leaves rained down upon the scene. The mothers turned their backs to the heat and pulled their children away. Crazy Bill stayed put, now laughing. Maven looked through the balusters, still unable to move. Some of the trees had turned to silhouettes, charred and menacing. Their branches were elongated spider legs, stretching and twisting into each other, writhing in the fire. In the heart of the blaze, she glimpsed a pair of bodies. They stood upright, draped in shadow, staring back. She cried out to them, gripping the pillars and screaming, but they did not seem to hear her. Then, all at once, they vanished into the flames, and she was all alone.

As the fire raged, all energy escaped her. She collapsed on the porch, the heat falling over her like a blanket. Her eyes found a cobweb, spun between a pair of balusters. At its center laid a large insect, orange and black, ensnared in the silky threads.

Strawberry Glitch, Haley Schneider

photograph: a mother in sepia wildflowers

Keng Xiong

every summer we took a different path to Duluth,
you were always insistent on seeing a grove of wildflowers
you planted with your mother.

twenty years spread on the dashboard:
a handful of letters,
sepia-colored photographs,
and a VHS tape,
the only proof she was alive
but enough.

together you planted the seeds at a rest stop
near a wooden bear statue you named paaj,
and still, you always had a way of naming things
and kept a list of wildflowers we spotted on the road:

1. wild geraniums
2. goldenrods
3. marsh marigolds
4. coneflowers

and in cursive loopy letters,

5. *poppies*

you didn't want to forget them
the way you forgot where to go,
the grove planted in another lifetime,
far enough you could not remember the unfamiliar turns
or the crumples and blotches of yellow
that comes with age.

I sat next to the passenger side window at twelve,
Minnesota on my lap,
looking at a view of Lake Superior
and the hushed currents beside me,
a churning dark blue.

It's this next one, look. I remember that rock, you said.

I nodded. It looked familiar,
but so did every jagged surface
that came before.

I'm tired, I said, but we kept going.

when night neared, we bundled ourselves
in a parking lot near a towering bronze eagle
you named *ntuj tshab*, to softly carry our dreams—

> *asleep I prayed I knew the place my mother dreamed about,*
> *wished for it to spark, for it to reappear,*
> *sepia held tightly to my chest,*
> *a lighthouse into her heart.*

come early morning I could see you pacing

> back and forth through the ice-patterned window,

an indigo sky painted behind you,

> singing so softly your song did not fog the air.

I often wonder

heading back home

if I'll search for something

I'll never find

and still sing

and smile

the way you shred

the list of wild flowers

and photographs

in pieces

and drove us home

past a cliffside

of *poppies*

I never saw.

you missed it, you said. *you missed the poppy fields.*

Heading back home.

Kuriose Geschichte, Yvette Higgins

I Dreamed Myself an Owl with Wings as Large as Skies

Harper Jenny

In the dream, I get new wings made of feathers and breeze. The wicked willows by the small stream on my Grandpa's property are the first ones to ever teach me how to dance. I am white-dressed, muddy, laughing and my arms are stretching while the sun behind the willow slices my body with shadow. The thin leaves spin me around the dirt until the wisp of my hair cuts my cheek. The blood that spills is just a little like home. When I blink, I'm back in old pink cowboy boots and holding a spyglass that is supposed to show me fairies. Mom picks me up and sits me roughly down in a chair for an unjust justice that I never did. My cousin is behind her all snot-nosed and wailing after I cut him off going down the hill on our bikes. I sputter, wet and raging, not having the right order of words to explain myself. An anger at my mother is born that day that never really leaves. I played too hard. I hold my spyglass up, riding without my handlebars, gasping, "Christian, I see them." Their tiny hands grab my handlebars trying to say hello to me, finally you see us! The image twists, and summer stains my lips raspberry red. The berries by the mailbox that grow on top of the chihuahua buried there taste like liquor. I hold my shirt open, dropping them inside but also delivering them straight to my mouth. My shirt never fills up and is stained a red that matches my lips. Mom will be angry. The ground begins to soften and I sink into it willingly. The next scene, I'm older and sitting in the bathtub, trapped inside a heart that gets so large it almost eats me alive. The power goes out and I can't leave the house, so I dry off and crouch on the steps facing the street. Lightning flashes. My roommate comes out in my borrowed cardigan and lets me know I can come back inside to the couch. We can watch TV on her laptop. The sky calls out to some part of me that unfurls its wings and is ready to dance.

The Valley

Jennifer Chao

let me tell you a story; for truth can be a novel of critical omissions. but make no mistake—the world *is* a valley, and it has always been that way.

I. "The trees grow on a slope, so thick and numerous it appears a great wall of trees brushing the sky. Nothing can be seen from the other side, but you would see nothing without such trees. Awed by the majesty of it all, so small humans become when standing at the foot of those deceptively tall, deceptively ancient beings, mystery held in gentle green hands. Still, you feel cradled—not trapped—in the soft center of a nest. Such is the illusion of the valley."

do you feel it? there's a strong breeze blowing
do you smell it? the watery soft rot of fruits
don't you know? the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick

II. i was "just" a kid when i ran over a caterpillar with my bike
strangely translucent it first held my curiosity
smeared on the pavement it was red after all

i danced on an anthill with my cousin jeering we called it a game
laughing we called it a *graveyard*
terrible evil thing i was | *am* | but at least now i *know*

children in paper crowns, slipping unsure, arrogant as hell
what am i entitled to? what do i deserve?

to feel warmth burst for just a second i might scrape my knees
if you're cold, i'll scrape yours too each year, i fall further | fall *harder*
don't you know? even the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel

III. today i stand in the valley…some might call it a pit. but i can pretend it's a mountain. maybe a ship? no, a raft in the middle of a quiet and motionless sea because all this wind is making me dizzy. why can't i pretend–we're under the same night sky after all. i'm traveling to…a magic land where no one knows me. and now i can read from an ancient book, cut my hair and toss it overboard, and to the moon–the dishonest moon that shines brighter than the rest of the stars, i can recite a riddle and a pledge:

"I'm worn out from hurt, and weary from stumbling
The heavens shift, below we are crumbling
I renounce my soul, to this world I will fall, what should be worth the weight of it all?"

What you were / what I was, Seren Erden

Temporary Tattoos

Lila Coval

Clementine Wallows had a ten-dollar tattoo of a frog on the inside of his wrist. If you ever met him, all you had to do was ask him about the little amphibian and he'd tell you her name was Barbara. He'd laugh when he said it.

Barbara found her way onto his skin in the seventh grade, behind the fourth pump at the gas station down the road from my house. We went together, and the tattoos were supposed to be matching. Clementine smiled when I couldn't follow through; he laughed when I bought him ice cream and apologized. He held my hand when we rode back to my house on our bikes, even though Mom said it was dangerous.

He had chocolate ice cream smeared across his chin when we ditched our bikes in the front yard, it made his green eyes glow. His fingers pulled me into my house, through the front door and down the hall lined with photos of Mom and me. He tumbled into my room, and I tackled him onto the plaid comforter I'd made up that morning. His eyes glittered and shone, wrinkling in the corners where his smile was too big for his face. He was missing a tooth, an adult tooth he'd knocked out on his bike at the park. He kept it in a jar on his desk.

"Your mother is going to cry," I whispered into the soft skin of his neck.

Clementine huffed, "My mother always cries." I felt the words he didn't say, the ones that vibrated in his throat but never made it past his lips: she wouldn't look long enough to notice. She never had, not since Clementine was born with his father's eyes

Clementine Wallows had a seven-dollar tattoo of a fish on the inside of his elbow—Blub. He always wanted a pet, and the second he saw the tank of rosy minnows, it was over. He loved that fish, when it would eat so happily, when it'd dance around its tank like there was nowhere it would rather be. I didn't understand the joy; it seemed too simple.

When I saw that fish, I knew it wouldn't end well, and maybe I hated that fish with green-eyed jealousy or wide-eyed fear. I knew what it

would do to him. Blub swam its way to the inside of Clementine's left elbow, and I wondered if he ever noticed how he rubbed the tattoo when he was nervous or guilty.

The tattoo faded into a shadow, but Clementine never got another pet after the needle buzzed a scar of his grief into his fragile flesh sophomore year. I held him when he cried, after Blub died, and my fingers never left his waist when we filled Blub's empty tank with daisies.

Clementine Wallows had a tattoo of a lightning bolt on his right ankle. It was free, part of a childish dare freshman year. I poked it into taut skin with trembling hands, and it came to life, zapping me with every pained gasp that slipped through Clementine's tightly clenched teeth.

I always hated the intrusive nature of thunderstorms, how clouds choke out the sun, breathe rain that stings like fire, and scream thunder. "The anguish of the heavens," Clementine would say.

Third grade was kind to me, it gave me him. But so did that storm. I felt the thunder deep in my bones as it rolled in through the humid, sticky air, and my brain buzzed with the nearby presence of untamed electricity. Big, heavy clouds unleashed torrents of raindrops, each the size of ping-pong balls or oversized grocery store blueberries.

Everyone jolted when thunder shook the school walls. Even the teachers shot useless glances at the windows as if to scold the storm for disrupting their teachings. It was in vain, of course—Mother Nature wasn't someone to reprimand, Mother Nature made the rules.

My nails burrowed into the fragile skin above my ears as the dark clouds advanced, trying to block out the thrumming of the skies. Tears tasted like rain when they met the corners of my lips.

Hands on my shoulders made me jump. The soft fingers rubbing soothing shapes onto my back were difficult to focus on, but I tried anyway as triangles morphed into circles, squares melted into stars, and soon I could take in a full breath and let it go. My inhales, no longer quivering, were guided by a big spiral starting at my shoulder and ending on my spine. My exhales were narrated by a star with squares at each point, and then flowers up the notches of my back.

My savior was all messy hair and the biggest eyes I'd ever seen; those eyes held warmth the sky never could.

We weren't very old, far too young for the formal pleasantries usually exchanged in greetings, but he stuck his hand out anyway. I glanced from his hand to his face and back again, shaking it with what I deemed the appropriate strength. His nails were broken and uneven, colored in with blue and red permanent markers. His skin was so pale it tinged purple around the veins in his wrists, and my hand looked like his shadow.

He pulled me up and dragged me to the looming, windowless doors just beyond the classroom. When I hesitated, he didn't; he threw the doors open with reckless certainty.

Fresh air hit my nose like a grenade—or maybe something softer—exploding across my face. The sun was poking through the clouds, bright and comforting, reaching for him when

he held his palms up to the sky. The ground was damp, the air still wet with rain, but my limbs loosened, and my shoulders broke from their pinched paralysis.

A teacher called our names, herding us back inside while we smiled the confident grins that friendship was made of. When we took our seats, I knew Mother Nature was no match for Clementine Wallows.

We went to the creek at the end of the summer, the one behind his house. We stumbled down the well-worn trail between clumps of waist-high grasses, sandals slapping bare feet and muddy earth. His fingers traced the ferns we passed, the cattails, the wildflowers. He plucked a daisy from the side of the path and tucked it behind his ear, glancing back at me with red-tinged cheeks and a smile that settled warm in my chest.

Clementine Wallows had a twenty-five-dollar tattoo of a bouquet of daisies on the back of his left calf. He spent more money on that tattoo than the others. He got it with a fake I.D. at the dimly lit shop next to the interstate. The design was supposed to be an even fifty dollars, but the artist messed it up. Clementine liked the tattoo for its imperfections, and when it was healed and I could trace it with gentle fingers, he'd sigh so pretty and melt in my hands.

At the creek, he settled onto a boulder in the middle of the stream with a handful of flowers. He wove a crown in a silence that I filled with stories and dreams. Every dozen words he'd laugh, and his eyes would float up from his weaving, finding mine. I'd trip over to him and hand over the rocks I'd found worth keeping, the ones that would end up in his room on the shelf of things we'd stolen from the creek. He told me I was like a crow, bringing him random objects that made me think of him, but he was the one who kept every rock, pebble, bottle cap, or oddly shaped stick.

Water flowed between my toes, cold on the soles of my feet. I kneeled in the shallow stream, rocks pinching my skin, and he placed the woven flower crown on my head. I was sure I looked stupid, but when Clementine beamed, it didn't matter. On our way back to the house, the crown fell into the creek and was carried off by the current, shredded by jagged pebbles and sharp boulders' edges.

Clementine's house was empty when we crashed through the front door and wiped creek water from our skin with crusty rags. The basement light flickered on as I settled into the saggy couch at the bottom of the stairs. A remote flew towards my head and I clicked the TV on to the show we watched together, some sitcom I never bothered to learn the name of. Clementine was in my lap a moment later, a pile of sunshine as warm as it was bright.

"You know those 'wrong way' signs on entrance and exit ramps?"

Dr. Kelly stared at me for a long moment before nodding. "I do."

"Those used to scare me because they face both directions."

She tapped her pen against the side of her notepad. "You're not scared of them anymore?"

"Guess not."

Dr. Kelly was the third therapist I'd seen that month, but she was the only one who didn't sugarcoat her words or take any shit, and I respected her for it.

"Is there anything else you used to be afraid of that now seems mundane?"

"I know what you're getting at," I said, ignoring the pressure behind my eyes and the way my voice cracked.

"What am I getting at?"

I sighed through my teeth. "You want to dissect how I'm coping with everything." When she didn't respond, I scrubbed a hand down my face. "Aren't we supposed to talk about how I feel?"

Dr. Kelly blinked. "Do you want to?"

I drove for hours after the appointment, to my aunt's lake house in the foothills and back, all freeway with the windows rolled down and the music too loud. I played all the songs Clementine hated, the ones that made him wrinkle his nose and click the button to disconnect aux. It felt good, knowing he'd hate the music and tell me to slow down. He always told me to slow down, and I always listened.

Dr. Kelly told me to write down what I felt when I thought about him. I want to hate him, I want to hate him so, so much. But I don't, I couldn't. It wasn't his fault, nothing ever was.

I drove faster, mashing the pedal to the floor while the engine roared. Crashing didn't scare me, despite how much I told myself and Dr. Kelly it did.

Mom called two hours into my drive, but I didn't answer. She called again four minutes later. I picked up the third time, gripping the wheel with cramped fingers. She sighed heavily into the speaker and the speedometer drifted up to ninety. Her words were rushed and unimportant, and I was nearing triple digits. I apologized for something I didn't hear, my words pulling a softer sigh through the phone. One of us hung up, it didn't matter who. Maybe it was both of us. The phone slid onto the floor under the passenger seat, and the gas light flickered on.

It would've been smart to slow down, so I went faster, grinning like a maniac in the dark emptiness of the car.

I have a clementine tattoo on my arm. I went to a real studio with good reviews, but sitting in the chair with the needle in my skin felt like betrayal. My eyes were pinned open the whole time. I was afraid to blink.

It had been weeks since I last slept well. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Not the Clementine I knew, but the twitching, foaming version, the one he left me with. Dr. Kelly said to think of the positives: the way he smiled, his eyes bright with contagious joy, the sound of his laugh forever tangled in my heart. Like caffeine and sugar, it was addicting.

I had withdrawals, my hands shook, my knees trembled when I tried to stand. I was never hungry and everything ached. I was lonely, too; not the lonely we'd joke about when we stole Clementine's mom's alcohol, not the lonely we'd whisper about when our conversations ran to the gutter, not the lonely our friends groaned about at school. I was lonely in a deeper sort of way.

The tattoo is nearly healed, and I slept well last night. I dreamed of daisies and frogs, of bikes and creeks. I dreamed of fish and grief and holding sunshine in my arms, between my fingers, against my lips. When I woke with tears fresh on my cheeks, citrus lingered on my tongue.

A Witness to the Absent Moon, Max Ridenour

Champagne's Candelabra

J Ryan

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The Mudroom

Rachel Small

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Change of Season, Kathryn Blommel

skeins

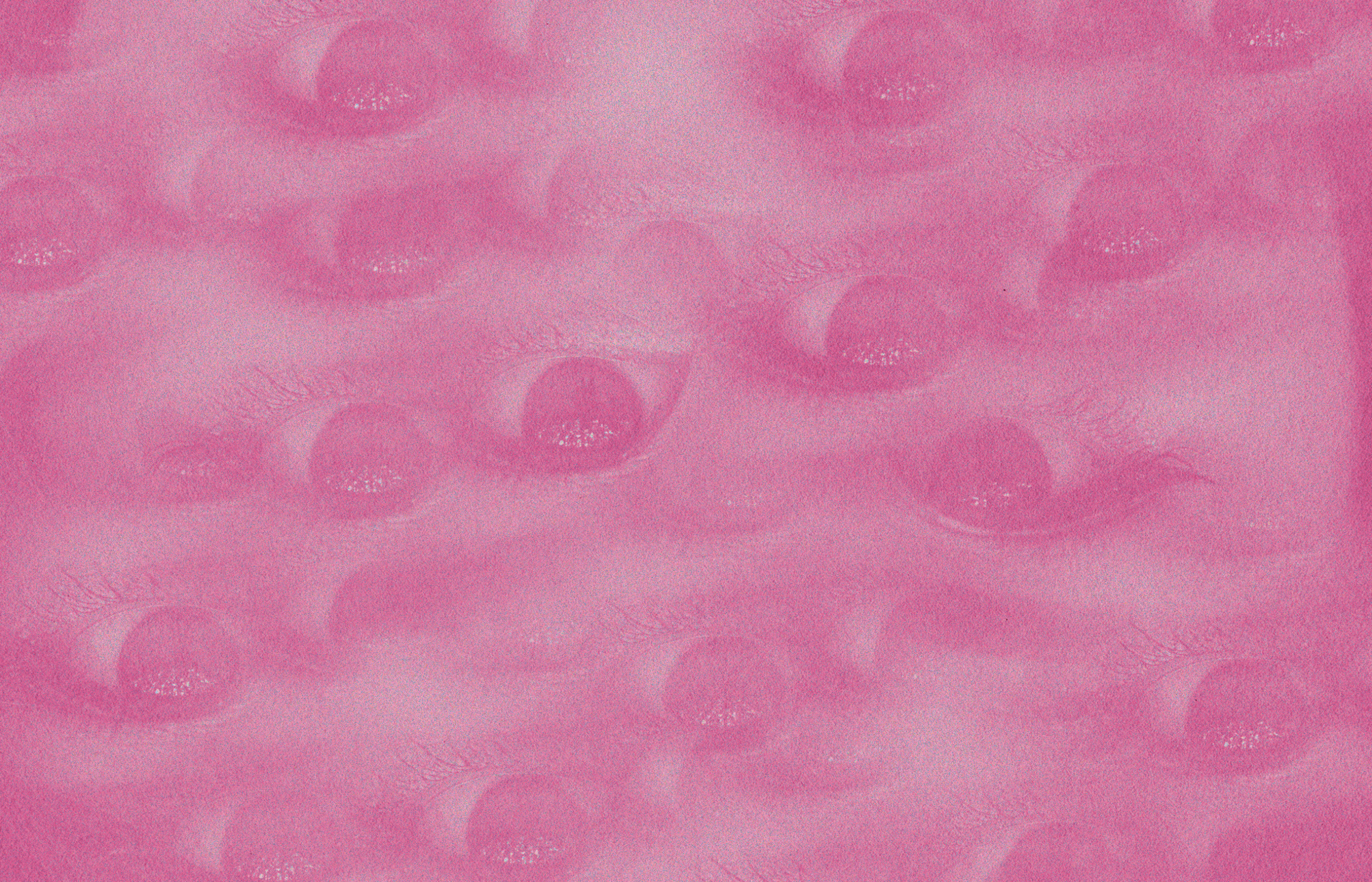
Laszlo Jentes

the difference between knotting and knitting
is the hole and the i-less needles it seeks
the cavity and the sliver-cut nails
shivering fingertips fumble in choosing
a craft.

you could slip the skein back on itself
tighten an embrace that binds fibers
into a swollen belly, making
a body that flails against small gates,
the coiling crush of cord
where the tension draws the belly
taut and dense and furled.
the only way through is to cut.

or you could,
or maybe,
or

you lack needles.
the knot doubles.
you scrabble in the dirt.
the knot doubles.
you try and fail to compress dust.
the knot doubles.
you place your fingers gently in the loops.



Green Glow, Tong Liao

On the lip of the seventh well

Amital Shaver

I am dreaming in Hebrew on a rainless moon, a thick beautiful incessant thing of mitochondrial luck. My mother's
tongue, my mother tongue, stuffed like rice into my ears, burst into its burning sauce /
a conversation /
an argument (the way that prayer is an argument) that I am playing like racquetball in order to understand, to live here, I
want to stay here. I am dreaming in Hebrew and clinging on
like a baby. When

awake, I dream of my sister at seven in my brother's sweater, holding
several burekasim in her cool palms before the heat of the day has set in, the
bakery's racks empty of the fascinating bread we never interested ourselves in, only the
things soaked in sugar syrup or smelling
of onions. The bakery at the city limits. My

perpetual question of sorrow is whether my mother dreams in Hebrew, whether my grandfather dreamed in Hebrew or Polish or French or German or Yiddish or Hungarian or English or Polish, especially during night terrors I
can guess. Gei schlufen. A reminder that falling asleep and
sleeping are different words. In this dream in Hebrew I thought I was being led by the hand as if I could no longer see but there was no hand and no seeing, only
hearing my tongue untangling in my mouth.
My breathlessness to get a word in
in the language of my kitchen sink and the tongue of my mother, her glasses fogging in the steam of the rice, the flashy sound of the first addition of
water which has always frightened me so. And so

waking up with my tongue flat and muscular, in the water of the rice and under the shade of Be'er Sheva which is so rare, my most
only most recent ancestors stirring me through the
side of my ribs to wade with them, wade out of sleep andback to the desert.

I See You

Andrea Bly

I lie in bed staring at the drab rafter ceiling; I dread drifting off. My body needs rest, still I resist. My subconscious struggles to accept what you have done to yourself. Under the moonlight when things become silent, my mind searches for you but finds only confusion and blood. This torment plays in a loop, night after night. Turning onto my side, I look outside the window: the white half-moon is hiding behind dreary clouds. They float by at amazing speed. The evergreens are swaying side to side—it must be windy again. The clouds and trees feel hypnotizing.

The sun shines brightly, the air warm. I stand on the cement patio attached to the back of the farmhouse. I see you. My heart skips a beat, my breath is tight in my chest. You look exactly like you did when I was a small girl: young and handsome with straight, jet-black hair, tan, healthy skin, and dark eyes. I can tell you have been out in the field working from the dirty hands and stained blue jeans. You're smiling bashfully at me; you look so happy. Behind you in the yard, the new swing set moves in the warm spring breeze. If I look further, I can see golden stubble fields, seeds not yet sprouted. I must have fallen asleep.

I feel like a little kid, giddy to see dad after being with mom all week. Wonder what we will do this weekend? Maybe you bring me with in the tractor to plant some crops, then after we finish, we can go to a movie. That's what we should do. You're still grinning at me. I have a million questions with no idea where to start, my chest is so tight. When you left you put so many questions in my heart. Your arms reach for me, I reach up for you; I need to feel you, even if you're only an apparition. I'll take anything. I feel lighter. This small gesture removes the weight I have been carrying for months. I can breathe again.

I pull away, just enough to look at that smile again. You needed this as well. Finally, I manage to get words out: "I miss you, Daddy." You say

something to me, but I can't hear your voice. I don't know what you're saying. I can see you, why can't I hear you? I need to hear your voice. I try again: "Why did you do this?" The smile fades from your face. The sadness in your eyes is overbearing. You shake your head and pull away, turning your back to me. The world grows dark, yet there is a spotlight of sun on you. It's as if we are standing in an antique photo. I don't feel panic, only sadness that you're leaving. Grasping at your arm, I beg, "I'm sorry, please don't go. I love you." You glance over your shoulder, and mouth, "I have to, I love you too." Regret paints your dark Italian features. Your lips continue to move, but I cannot hear your words. I can sense your emotions. Life was changing too fast; it was overwhelming, and you didn't know how to deal with it. You didn't know how much it would hurt me, or you never would have made this choice. I understand that now.

I loosen my grip on your arm. You slowly pull away, turning your back to me once again. As you descend the broken steps with your head hanging low, I notice your gray hair. You walk past the rusty swing set, towards the stunted canola field. I turn away. I cannot bring myself to look at that ragged field. The same sad field they found you in on a warm spring morning.

My eyes open. The half-moon is still there, but the clouds are gone and the trees are still. The wind must have quit. I feel a sense of calmness mixed with sadness. Sadness isn't a new feeling, but calmness is. I think it might be okay to sleep now. Maybe you'll come back.

Economic Histories

Joe Petersdorf

In 20XX, the generated whatever reigns supreme,
there is no plummeting body. Instead
a scion of a scion of a scion creates a new coin
while burning a server farm
and we heat up in fury both because of the fact it kills the soul and the body and the earth
but that it is made for children and, in a sense he is a child,
bright lights flicker, spend the wheel, feel like god.
He games, he gets off daily to some cartoon he swears has deep themes.
He rants about how his family was an unsound investment.
You swirl your coffee while he rambles about his next big startup, already financed:
A crypto currency but for artists; imagine, a fully generative content principle all at your
fingertips. All of this before he begs you for just a little tongue in the alley,
before he has to call his wife, fumbling with his belt; he's
asking her, no, asking you to train his kids in the new art;
but he gets them only on the weekends,
to have the new art which replaces the old;
Mona Lisa on the track pad, and you can't help but think
about the eucalyptus you grew up around.
some day they'll go too, and even if the next one will sell you the image, maybe
you'll be around to tongue the real deal burn

The Sign and the Symbol, Isabella Spiess

linger-hang

Quinn McClurg

When and how, in an orchestra hall now, nothing is to be taken seriously— / Dense-filtered showmanship through a slice of bread, a program as artistically contextualizing as it is poorly worded, / quietly shuffling under / a brigade of caesura swords, thimble-bending broad strokes to battlefield, immediately leveled by brass, tectonic craters of harmonization / before cavalry charge, wooden stakes—rosin bows weaving in and out of underbrush, honing arrow to reverberating vibration, / to fill space between applause.

But soft, chart change and battlement lines break: / churning French horn to realized Russian Visigoth-dream, / the vibrancy of spindles and flowing skirts, some sunbleached Italian daydream-waltz until / the sunsets start / and resonance tapers to small plaster-huddled courtyard, / the pavement still warm (sans descending sun), / and sitting, / whittling out a fire brigade charge on unwinding strings, / chasing the dripping light over a distant hill. / We can be sure it is gone now / with night cooling to a thick humidity haze, / courtyards echoing louder as someone yells, / "give me a dancer, (some new and foreign dialect,) to show me how to appreciate this music!" / But now alone with tepid guitar, no "us" anymore. / Some time passes, listening to the far off life of the night-drenched city, / someone, (one of us ("us" still separated)), weeping at the colorless walls— / hosting the cruelty of attaining rare free time / and having no one better to share it with.

Eventually, the night pools to a point where everyone starts emerging / masqued or unmasqued from lavish holes and anonymous halls / and I emerge from the ever-tangled web of things we gift each other / scraps of conversation / and the demystification of time signatures / to unravel high above your cool and uncovered heads, / the spiced streets throbbing underfoot, / under cool sky-dark, / too-soon-to-be-dawn / plucking out crystalline on shards of moonlight trails, / moving in the slender seconds of narrow time, / draped in all the invisible linens laying across the stars /

and in the ice crystals of a moondog. / Then, my unraveling turns ever faster
before snapping out—
arm held out in jubilation,
ecstasy,
awe of gravity-momentum,
enchanted adrenaline—
I know you (know me) by our other name, “wide-eyed, grin-impossible”—
the dancer, (us,)
shaking with
the fear of heights
quenched in this dangling
satin

dalliance.
Balalaika, play on; / it’s some early morning hour—
let me linger-hang loose above the city streets
a little longer
(before the sun stifles us again
(pushing us into plaster walls and orchestra halls))
evermore.

Astronauts in London, Ava Jax

Dream or Not?

L. H. Cheung

A personal tribute and testimony to dreams, records, and memories

***

More words, words, and words / Memory fades / As we march back, back

***

Disclaimer

The following statements are not purely fictional, and any similarity to real events are not pure coincidence.

The following statements consist of half-dreams, half-truths, full-dreams, and full-truths.

One or more of these statements are true (or could be true):

***

一、忘
Part I. Against Memory (Personal shenanigans)

1. You open your Xmas gift box and a fluffy chicken pops out

2. You grind your teeth so hard that they shatter into tiny little pieces like tasty cereal powders; they felt like sands in your mouth, and you could never really wash the haunting aftertaste away

3. You will never know the end of that epic-awesome-legendary game because it ended too early and your awake brain simply cannot finish solving the puzzle by your asleep brain, so now it's lost forever

4. You develop an inexplicable and irresistible urge to pluck your hairs out one by one; by the end of the plucking you've gone proudly bald, and your scalp now looks like a shaved chicken

5. Your loved ones are all gone, or they all hate you, or you have done things so terrible that hurt them so much and now they're hurt and hate you, and when you woke up you're so flooded with relief and you could only thank Everything that they're still here and they are all right and they still love you

6. You develop a habit of obsessively screenshotting nearly every social media post you see because you know they won't be there forever; no, they'll be gone in a blink of the eyes, just like the lives behind them

7. An ethereal melody drifts into your head in that half-asleep, half-awake, in-between stage; you shrug and let it go because you'll "remember it later", but when you wake up next morning it's gone from your brain without a trace, and you know you'll never find that beautiful lost melody again, you'll never remember the notes, you'll just remember that it's lost and beautiful

8. It's nap time in the kindergarten and all the other kids had gone to sleep, but you simply couldn't sleep—until the teacher started to yell at you. You're brawling your eyes out and the teacher is threatening to throw your shoe out of the windows. You feel so scared and stupid and

ashamed. Why couldn't you just shut up and go to sleep?

9. Out of nowhere, an unexpected deadline pops into your schedule and the time is NOW so you must act NOW even though there's no way you're going to catch that meeting on time even if you run so fast that your feet are on fire

10. A gun fires.

11. You find an mp3 file of piano music, played by your high-school self from four years ago. Nostalgia hits you as you rush to your piano to play it again for probably the first time in four years

12. Again, an ethereal melody drifts into your half-asleep mind. This time you jump out of the bed and aggressively sing the tune into a recording phone in the middle of the night. Next morning you'll remember the tune; it's just okay, but at least you have it recorded somewhere

13. You and your family got caught up in a terrible retro style movie-game that's a blend between Tamagotchi and pixels and bad horror film and sci-fi-y time travel and Marvel villains and… apparently carjackings? You wake up puzzled about how your brain came up with such a weird pop culture salad and why you couldn't remember a single coherent plot, just the fragmented keywords that might as well be randomly generated nonsense

14. Did you really write that? Or did you dream that you wrote it, when you actually read it somewhere else? Did you really read that?
15. Again, out of completely nowhere, a previously nonexistent exam pops into your schedule. The most important exam in your life is happening right now and you're late, lost, and utterly unprepared. How could you forget it existed?!

16. Your past self is a distant memory. Actually, even your semi-recent self feels faraway, like another world, another life, another person. It's like you've periodically built and rebuilt a mental wall between the past and the present, and every second the present is fading fast into the past

17. You're back to your old home, but somehow it's different. It feels cold and unfamiliar and wrong. It even smells wrong, like damp dust and loneliness and a sack of sad, moldy clothes

18. Looking at your childhood photos feels so strange, so unreal. It feels barely you, just a faint echo from a past so distant that it might as well be a dream

19. Suddenly you remember this one specific post you once came across on the Internet but you don't know where to find it, or if it's even still out there. You think back to the tens of thousands of screenshots stored in your album. You wonder if you could still find a needle within a haystack

20. You stay up all nights and sleep through the days. Your cycle is in an entirely different time zone. You half-heartedly joke with your friend (who's in yet another time zone): it's like you never left your home at all

21. You can't remember what it's like to live in your previous home; how the furniture's arranged, what it's like to eat, sleep, walk, go about your life in that room that used to be your world. All you have left is the videos you took on your phone the day you moved out: an empty, lonely room that's gutted of all furniture and seems all too large; you can't even remember what it was like to just lay on the bed and idly stare at the sunshine on the wall

22. Conclusion: Dreams will disappear fast if they're not written down.

***

away from the future / away from ourselves / away from our memories

Marching relentlessly / relentlessly / into the

***

二、网
Part II. Against History (Political shenanigans)

23. A man snaps. A gun fires and hits a lamppost. A crowd clamors in protest.

24. You look up a book on neurodivergence, and apparently your (and your dad's) brain functions in a way that it can't see too far ahead or behind. You're perpetually stuck in the present, unable to see beyond it—no history, no future, no identity.

25. Actually, two fluffy chickens pop out of your gift box. Your screech of delight is filmed and permanently recorded in a camera as a part of a video memoir, forever for now (at least until the camera breaks and the data wastes away).

26. You don't feel safe posting online.

27. You look through old screenshots in your phone and come across an old Weibo post. Coincidentally, it's the post you were looking for (you forgot you were even looking for it before you saw it): a visual poem written during the outbreak of pandemic, titled 我们会忘 (We Will Forget). You think back to the outbreak of the pandemic, and even more, to the outbreak of public grievances that will eventually and inevitably die down, and what will be left then? It all seems like such a long time ago.

28. You remember making a secret vow to yourself that you'll never forget, but never forget what? You could barely remember it now, and you just feel so stupid and helpless and powerless, so powerless against a system of oblivion designed against the preservation of history and memory.

29. You attend a vigil for the first time in your life, and all you could remember now (aside from how extremely underwhelming it was, with the speaker's muffled mic and everything) is how cold it was to stand in the chilling snow of Minnesota, how many people stood there regardless, and how everyone was scared shitless like you.

30. You don't feel safe writing this prose.

31. You dissociate from your past, your life, yourself. You're walking in a dream. The line blurs. Night is day and day is night. Real feels unreal while unreal feels real. Will you wake up?

32. Call a spade a spade, they say, but everywhere we pointed at a deer and called it a horse.

33. You don't feel safe speaking. You don't feel safe writing. Actually, you don't feel safe existing.

34. The Internet forgets everything, from last week's tragedy to that one person you've been following whose entire account was just made to "vanish" overnight to everything it should remember—except some things, like that one embarrassing thing you posted as a teenager, or that one video posted on some shady porn sites, or that one Google search that later turned up in a targeted advertisement; then it never ever seems to forget.

35. The fluffy chickens silently stare back at you from the table. They are feathery and pleasant to the touch. You'd take pictures of them, but you can't capture how they felt in your hand.

36. It's okay if you don't finish your sentence. It's okay if you leave your proses and poems and verses half-done. You could always come back to it later. But can you really do that?

37. Maybe our brains tend to forget horrible and unbearable things. Maybe we want to leave them behind to protect ourselves.

38. You forget all dreams in the past four days. You didn't remember any of them, or you remembered but you forgot. Some of them are actually horrible. That's all you remembered. You would've written them down, but it's just too difficult and disturbing and unbearable.

39. Social media scares you so much. You vow yourself of them because you saw on the news that people are arrested and jailed for shitposting low-effort memes about their political leader; they shitposted on then-Twitter and they're arrested once they're back in their home country, which happens to also be your home country, and for things like that you don't think you could ever go back home.

40. No more breaks for you, because you're back to school. Officially. (Thank Earth it's a dream.)

41. You read the book again, and apparently research shows that ADHD makes life spans shorter by 12.7 years on average. You suffer an existential crisis at (a) your own mortality and (b) the fact that the first twenty years of your life had passed faster than some lousy YouTube videos about cats doing funny quirky weird things (and the rest might pass even faster).

42. The places, the people, the homes, the lands you left behind—they're not quite there. They're always here. You wish you made more records.

43. Conclusion: The past will be forgotten fast; it's not documented. Faster if there are people and systems actively working to erase it.

***

One year / Thirty-Four Years / So fast / A blink of the eye
Forgotten cries / Forgiven lies / Put behind so easily
Can we afford closing our eyes?

***

三、望
Part III. Against Forgetting (Poetry shenanigans)

44. If a tree was chopped down in the forest but no one remembers it, did it happen at all?

45. Last night, you screamed in your sleep. It's not the first time. You don't remember what it's about. You never did.

46. You revisit 1984 (again) and become disturbed at how close it hits home. You think about how some people might not feel that way, that to them, it might as well just be a faraway fantasy, a bad dream, and you become even more disturbed.

47. You're back to school. For real this time. You call that a winter break?!

48. You revisit 1989 (with your parents). Like most, they've made their own "peace" with it. Like most, they'd rather not think too hard about it now. It's not that they want to forget, it's just that some things are too painful to dwell upon. When justice is delayed for too long, with no hope that you'll ever see it served in your life, one way or another, you have to make "peace" with it.

49. You struggle to remember anything, from drinking water on time to last night's dream to time itself — you seem to forget it all. Back home, the news and the net suffered from state-mandated amnesia while an official spokesperson urged to preserve the "Correct Collective Memory."

50. "Was it all a dream?"

51. You wish you made more records. You wish you had better memory.

52. In a fit of rage against the forgetting and enforced memory, you write down your first poem that actually felt risky and painful and soul-crushing. You don't feel safe writing it, but you're not just a poet in personal pain. You're now a poet in political pain. Congrats!

53. "The Internet doesn't forget" is a lie, because inside the great firewall everything suffers from amnesia.

54. Your dad had a dream-weaver's job. It consisted of posting the right words under the right comment section at the right time so the right people will see the right opinion. His diligent coworkers, unaware that he was on their team, launched a coordinated smear campaign on him, unleashing all sorts of flaming, trolling rhetoric. He didn't stay in the dream for long.

55. Going through the old stuff is physically excruciating and soul-crushing, like swimming through decades of dirty laundry—you can pretend it doesn't exist, but it'll still pile up and overflow and flood everything.

56. You find an mp3 file from four years ago of your high-school self bawling her eyes out. Over what? You don't remember, like a lot of things. You'd rather not remember.

57. Your mom had a dream-patcher's job. One word from above was all it took to shut down or sew up something undesirable. As acts of protests, they deliberately left pages blank. A blank paper speaks louder than a thousand words. She didn't stay for long either.

58. A gun fired. A barrel swung down. Your dad got struck, or not. He barely dodged it, or not. He couldn't quite remember. He'd rather not remember. Back home, your mom watched everything on a television and bawled her eyes out.

59. The Day comes and goes, passing by faster and faster every year. Each year, the past feels more ungraspable and illusive than ever, and instead of asking about it or talking about it, you pass the day silently, idly, like any other day. How many June 4ths are there left in your life? In mom's and dad's lives? Maybe that's how memory dies. And along with it, so does history and our future.

60. You stop talking about it. Mom brings it up on a cross-country video chat and dad nervously shuts it down. The Wall has ears, and they're scared. Because the wall in its ultimate form doesn't only live outside—it also lives inside, in every one of us.

61. You watch the past die, slowly in your loved

ones who lived through it, all the while the world inside the wall continued to ban the square of 8, athletes hugging, specific numbers arranged together, objects arranged in a row, or anything that reminded people of the square and the tanks.

62. You want to remember so badly, but your memory is failing, and the past is slipping away every second. In a system that purposefully cultivates forgetting, in a world made of half-memories and mis-memories, of half-lies and lies, in a system where memory is not only draining away, but purposefully wiped away and overwritten with the "correct" ones, what other choices do you have but to forget?

63. Conclusion: To fight against time, tyranny, and totalitarianism is to fight against forgetting.

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64.

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The End?

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四、往
Now / Later / Soon / Never

65. We're all living in the past, and soon our lives will be but a distant dream. But...

66. The past could never be truly erased; it resurfaces in unexpected ways like traumatic dreams in the collective subconscious and ends up screwing everyone up like some kind of Freudian psychobabble.

***

Shouts on the square / Shouts on the bridge / Shouts on the streets

***

67. Memory can be manufactured. Forgetting can be manufactured, too.

68. Government censorship of the truth and history is gaslighting on a collective, national scale.

***

69. What's the China Dream? What's the American Dream? What does a nation dream about? Why do we only talk about the shiny, huge, grand Dream? What about the tiny ones? The squashed dreams? The forgotten dreams?

70. They always want you to forget, to forgive, to "get it over with," to fall into the spiral of silence. But...

***

Families, friend, children of our nation / our last generation

***

That's how they do it / As long as you still love / You'll never be free

***

71. We could fight against the forgetting, the manufactured oblivion. We could fight it, one word at a time, with poorly written poems and speechless personal conversations and frantic scribbles on a notepad and even just a tiny personal tribute like this. And...

***

Remember, remember, the 13th of October
So long as we remember
So long as we remember

Extract from "Remember 10/13," written 1 year and 5 days after the Sitong bridge protest
2023/10/18, 5:18 PM
Where is the Bridge Man?

***

72. You're not alone. Let this be the proof of that. The past is never gone, because you carry a piece of it. We all do. We're all living embodiments of it. And there are people willing to stand with you through the heat and the chilling snow.

We're here, we have always been here, and we're not alone.

Kill Your Darlings, Theodorus Collette

MANIC

Bianca Llerena

Cut the tied string!
Shatter the glass illusion of reality!
Rip to shreds the beautiful spirals of love and life!
Rush to the side of the sickly!
Forget who you imagined you were!
Remember you know nothing!
Alienate loneliness and the forever remorse!
Mill into powder the bodily figures you hate!
Be a mouse inside the cat's stomach!
Wreck all of the homes surrounding you!
Rot backward until you are human again!
Stand on cement! Without fear!
Burn religion and pray to God!
Wake the sleeping man and sing to him!
Run east! Then run west!
Murder the fallacy of importance!
Turn off your alarms!
Call the doctor! Call the butcher!
Close the blinds to shield the neighbors!
Suckle milk like a child!
Give your shoelaces to the homeless!
Grip your hands until they sweat!
Jerk the bedpost off the wall!
Open the window!
Escape!

The Queer Apocalypse

Stella Mehlhoff

We are pushing our way through a stampede. I hold your hand lightly, in a way that looks dainty but is really sort of desperate. My attention is capable of processing only two sensations: The sight of your stupid neon pink backpack, the one made for kids, bouncing in front of me, leading us forward to the sidewalk where there might be space to take a deep breath. And the soft, warm presence of your fingers, your skin the most pronounced thing in all this mayhem.

It's our first Pride—not yours, mine, but ours. We spent the morning tentatively on the sidelines of the main strip, getting day drunk in the grass, the music bruising our ears even from a distance. We sat across from each other. I kissed you first this time, and it felt like a big step, letting myself go—sunburnt, dizzy, tender. Some man with neon-dyed eyebrows and a mesh t-shirt asked to take our picture, and I let you say yes. We all leaned over his Nikon so he could show us the tiny square with the result. In it, our cheeks pressed together, we beamed with the new delight of being public. Seeing us like that, it made me blush with a feeling not unlike being kissed—ecstatic, exposed.

The photographer tapped me on the nose. "What you need," he said, fishing a dollar store set of sticky rhinestones out of his pocket, "is some color." So you coached him, with your giggly charm, on where to put them. More than once you had to catch my hand, which rose to my face with the instinct of an itch, before I picked them off.

And then we were wandering together for what felt like hours, pausing at booths and picking up paraphernalia until it outnumbered what I came with. The rainbow flag tied around my shoulder like a cape. The knee-length striped socks you

won for me at an LGBTQ trivia stand. The free condoms and dental dams jammed in my waistband. The stickers and pins that weighed down my jean shorts. The body glitter you smeared on my arms and chest.

"Just beautiful," you said, holding me at arm's length by my shoulders to admire the day's handiwork.

"I feel like a christmas tree with too many ornaments," I said, sitting on the curb.

You took off a newly acquired glittery headband. As you sat beside me, you put it on with a flourish. "Nonsense."

The headband was too tight and the edges burrowed into my temples, but I didn't take it off because your eyes were so sweet and promising. My heartbeat was fluttering, whether from infatuation or dehydration I don't know, even though it was the only time we'd been still all afternoon.

"Come on," you said, and we were off again. "Let's go to the stage, see if there's dancing."

I hadn't realized until we stood back up how much the crowd had thickened. At first, it was exciting. The weaving and dodging. The sweat and the smiling, gracious excuse me's. The colorful, sexy outfits and the bodies that inhabited them. The half-empty bottle of rosé, clinking in your backpack as you skipped ahead.

But then, as if in an instant, the current of people seemed to change directions. And now, we seem to be defying it. My focus narrows. My face gets hot. I would call to you but you wouldn't hear it. Your fingers get slippery, the pink swatch of your backpack is blurred by movement. The world spins and I see him, the old man, clinging to a street lamp.

The crowd is indifferent to him. He is quite skinny, collar bones and shoulders protruding, exposing a curved spine. He is obvious in his simplicity: his gray t-shirt, khaki pants, small rainbow pin—a pocket of plain interrupting the wild color. His small, brown lace-up shoes are folded over one another at the toes, and with each elbow nudge he seems to swing from that point of contact. His mouth stretches open and closed at intervals in a way that—for the very old and newborns—could just as easily be effortful, but natural, breathing as silent moans of distress. I feel a pang in my chest. I want to go to him, to shelter him from the chaos, to hold my arms out and part the people like a stone disrupts a current. I imagine us face to face, his wrinkled eyes reflecting my need for a slower pace, a gentler joy.

"Excuse me!" someone and their friend say, not so smiling, not so gracious. The impact of their body against mine would send me stumbling if there were a place to stumble. Instead, I am just jostled, turned around. My eyes scramble for the street lamp, the old man. I notice both things at once: He is gone. I have lost your hand.

I call your name. I turn and turn. I shove past people with unforgiving urgency. Everything looks like your backpack—a woman's tight tank top, a fast food wrapper crumpled beneath our feet, a poster advertising a rave. But nothing has the familiar rhythm of your walk.

When I finally find you, I have lost it all, somehow, in the churn of the crowd. Somebody will have to clean up the trodden-over remnants tomorrow, I imagine—the rainbow flag, the buttons, the dental dams, the rhinestones. When you see me, you stand up and smile, arms wide.

"That was crazy," you say, all breathless radiance. You grab me by the shoulders, look me up and down, half-laughing. "What happened to you?"

My exhaustion, my panic, my confusion concentrates into a kind of heat. I might be crying when I say it, resisting the urge to hold you, shrugging off your hands—

"You just left me in there! And now you think it's funny? Can't you tell I'm here for you? Can't you tell I can't do this alone? Can't you tell I don't belong here by myself?"

A DICHOTOMY OF EVERYTHING: THE CURSE OF A NEVER ENDING STORY AND THE WAYS WE FEEL.

Ella Kunstman

celebratory shouts for the turn
of late august, when our feet become the seeds
beneath soil in the park we take
for granted, under the blinking lights:
the fireflies thrown from brambles,
they join the twirling of
our sisters, our brothers until
        we've danced so hard our limbs come to
        grab us from the sky.
until it's time for us to go back, bare feet left
slapped on solid concrete,

to home and the heartbreaking place
the roadkill looks the same here and *there* except
maybe *there* it looks more familiar,
        like maybe years ago i knew that
        twisted body, mangled face.
        two kids from my high school
        shot and killed a soccer coach and a school teacher
                lost by the entrance to the woods where we ran and ran 100 girls
                do their drills by flowers and piles of letters: the altar
all i remember, now and then
is that they were the only boys who bothered
to remember my name in the sixth grade.
why do i have to know all of this,
the smell of the lake as it rots,
the feeling of my own fingers and the roots, dirt beneath the nails
and when will i be brought back home again.

Doggy Dreams, L. H. Cheung

misc. dream membrane

Quinn McClurg

On the day that I stopped sleepwalking, I awoke from a dream,
pressed between two membranes:
sheet and blanket,
present and past,
skin and muscle;
simplified, waking and non-waking,
utterly contained within the confines of myself.

me, in the dark, cluttered upstairs in your cheap new flat,
your roommate (who i already met)
looking on at me
with the new eyes of a stranger.
i guess we'll go out drinking.
it seems the only appropriate thing to do.

And later in that other dream:

on the other side of enemy lines in some sort of canyon—
i shouldn't be here.
i am on the high ground, but the enemy sees me, comes marching in a band—
they shouldn't be here.
finding me panic-frozen, they shoot me in the chest and leave me for dead.
i feel the real panic of death set in
like staring down a wild animal, like becoming that wild animal,
like being irreversibly damaged, no way back,
nothing left but primal struggling
and unending awareness the whole way down.
they leave; i guess i wasn't even worth finishing off.
so in shock, i crawl, claw, and stumble to the edge of friendly lines,
more dirt in my wounds, more agonized blood in the sand.
then somehow i'm ok—i reach my hands in and pull the bullet out, laughing.
once patched up, i stare at myself in distinct fascination (like other dreams)
and laugh again, while everything outside melts away.

i marvel at the immensity of the feeling:
the wet landscape of my inner body,
the experiential waters of my inner self,
the ardent disbelief of possessing a physical form,
the mortal disbelief of almost losing it.

I woke up to a couple missed deadlines, two minutes before my alarm.
I wait for work I still need to do: pending edits, posted readings, downloading files.
I spend my first free time in a while wasting it—
I spend the rest interpreting my dreams,
although I like to think that I
am far past the fiber
of their influence.

10 O'Clock on Fourth St.

Ciara Weber

Lucy is standing near the inner laundry room door; she's forgotten to switch on the light. Her face is barely visible, but her stature is as familiar as my own. I can feel the movement of my smiling at her, and yet, she only stares solemnly back at me. I move to speak and cannot find the words.

"Eileen will be by soon," she says.

Lucy is mistaken, of course. Eileen only visits on odd weeks.

"You'll find me after?" She says.

Again, mistaken. I can't go after her, there is far too much to get done here.

"Do you have to go, Luce?" I find myself asking.

She says nothing. I don't look away until my vision of her has passed.

I lower my gaze. The table before me is covered with a wet tablecloth; white linen doused in red. I'm sure the substance is Cabernet. Yes, very sure indeed, though, the bottle is no place to be found and I cannot turn to look for it. My glass must've fallen over. Yes! A shard of it has scattered toward my right hand. Not too close. And the stem? Well, you see it's rolled off the table. Clear off it! You may not easily discern the glass, for its figure has vanished. A lazy pile of shards, pity.

From the upper floor, I hear a telephone ring, though I am plastered to my chair. I doubt it is anything important, anyway. Simone is always calling me about some odd thing. You'd think retirement would do a person good, and yet, she is even worse! If I have learned anything at all, it is that a truly effective boss sets up a foundation for a workplace. That way, when they leave, things can function properly. And that isn't to say Simone hasn't; she has! So? There is nothing left

for her to do! I suppose some people are born to work themselves to death. She truly will at this rate. Just last week she called asking about my plan for the upcoming release party, as if I could share information with a non-employee; it's utterly ridiculous!

The phone finally stops ringing.

Then, of course, a knock comes from the back door. People are relentless. Never once can I get through a day without someone checking in on me.

Whoever is knocking is being quite rude about it. If I felt able to stand and offer my attention, I would do so! Eventually, they relent, until a rock comes scuttering into the kitchen, leaving the sound of shattering glass in its wake.

"Miles," I say. I know.

And there he is, kneeling before me.

"Hi Bunny," he says.

Typical. Miles never could let a story rest.

"You're still angry with me?" He asks.

The entire weight of my lifetime of anger at Miles has condensed itself into a single story. Funny how that goes, isn't it?

When Miles and I were very young, our parents gifted me a bunny for my birthday. She was a very sweet, very small animal, and I only ever called her Bunny; I thought it suited her. I do believe Miles was always jealous of my parent's gift, as he thought it was a sign of their greater trust in me. They believed that I was capable of caring for a living thing, while he was more frequently given sweaters. And as so often is the case, we must find a way to crush any sign of hope in our siblings' lives.

One afternoon, when I arrived home from school, Miles greeted me with the knowledge that Bunny had died. Seemingly, an Ivy plant I'd begged my mother for had been toxic to her weak stomach. I was so distraught. How my brother managed his lie in the wake of my sorrow, I'll never comprehend. The truth about rabbits and Ivy is that it is only life-threatening when consumed in large quantities. In fact, Bunny lived a very long life; she even outlived Miles. What Miles had done was gift my rabbit to a girl in his class.

When I finally discovered this, Bunny, newly known as Floppy (ridiculous I know), had been the girl's pet for almost three years. Even though I knew it was cruel to take her away, something Miles never would understand.

So he thought keeping the name around would ease the pain. It did not.

"Why would I be angry?" I say.

A person who contains as much guilt as Miles will never admit the things they've done.

"I'm sorry, Bunny. For all of it," he says.

They will always offer an endless amount of vague, worthless apologies.

"We'll talk again soon," he says.

He stands to leave and takes the rock away with him.

From the table, I can see his figure disappearing into the backyard. In the darkness outside, I can no longer see him, but I can feel his presence replaced by a familiar, darker one.

This figure does not make itself seen; it simply stands near the window.

I worry that Miles has become angry with me. He was always a person whose entirety switched between waves of emotion. When I was eight and he was twelve, I broke a ceramic he had made in school, by accident of course. I only wanted to admire it, because it was very well done. Miles was so upset he became the embodiment of his anger. I had never seen a person that worked up before. I never touched another thing belonging to him.

The figure outside remains still. It does not move closer or further; it doesn't need to. We spend a very long time simply acknowledging each other's presence. I wonder what my life looks like from that angle: the kitchen floor covered in glass, the stained tablecloth, the lost bottle. What story might those images condense into? Not a very kind one, I imagine.

In an instant, Carmen is sitting before me.

"Hi dear," she says.

Carmen looks incredibly elegant. She wears a simple white cotton dress, though it looks quite exquisite worn by her. She's barely aged since the last time I saw her.

"I was hoping you'd be by, Carmen. I've missed you!" I say.

"It's been too long. Though that always seems to be the case, doesn't it?" She says.

"Have you flown in? I had no idea you'd be visiting so soon!" I say.

Carmen just smiles at me.

Once again, the upstairs phone rings. Suddenly, Carmen is gone.

It seems that whenever you fiercely wish for a person's presence, you very rarely are granted it; a lesson Simone could bother learning. Although she rarely calls twice, I always seem to answer.

From upstairs, I hear the ringing suddenly cut off. It is replaced by a muffled voice. I wonder if Carmen has gone to answer it. How sweet is she!

The mumbling grows louder, however. I don't recognize Carmen with that violent tone. The sound floods down the stairs, increasingly grating in volume.

Then suddenly, silence returns. I feel a hand on my left shoulder.

"Carmen?" I ask.

The figure behind me breaks out into laughter. Sharp, piercing laughter.

"Mother," I say.

She continues to laugh. Endlessly. I try and try to move my head, to meet her eye, but I am stuck.

"You've never been very funny, have you?" She says.

"I wouldn't call you a comic, either," I say.

This makes her laugh again, the sound even wilder.

"Look at the mess you've made," she says.

"I'm going to clean the glass up. The cloth is ruined but I have others," I say.

"There's no time left for cleaning," she says.

"What do you mean?" I say.

She pulls herself closer and laughs directly into my ear. I cannot move away from her. I cannot see her face.

"Your arm, dear. How will you clean that?" Her hand moves into my line of vision, grazing my lower arm. I cannot feel her touch.

"Your sight isn't like it used to be. It's just a few drops of wine, they'll wipe off." I uselessly attempt to pull my arm away from her touch.

Her tone shifts, she is regretful. "You've always made your own worlds out of reality. You refuse to live amongst the rest of us."

"You're speaking nonsense, mother," I say.

She laughs once more; the sound is hollow.

The phone rings again, and the sound warps into a deep scream. The noise is deafening.

I cannot move my arms to cover my ears. My mother's touch is gone. The floor appears to be sinking. I've never heard a sound this loud before; it's inhumane.

And then it's quiet once more.

I sit for a long moment, catching my breath. Somehow the tablecloth has become increasingly wet, and still, I cannot find the bottle. I glance in front of me, but I know it must be lying somewhere behind me. Somewhere I cannot reach. Panic grows inside of me. I don't remember sitting down. How often can a person forget how they've gotten somewhere before it becomes concerning? Lucy and I discussed this once, didn't we?

A soft whine breaks the silence. I look up to see a black cat perched on the nearby couch. Mitsy. He stares right back at me. Everything is at ease once more. My eyes well up and pour over. I never thought he'd return to us. He never liked to play, never liked to be held. He only ever cared to hide in each dark crevice of this house. The last time we saw him, Mitsy gave us quite a fright, slipping out an upstairs window in the night. Lucy will be so delighted to see him again.

"Lucy will be so delighted to see you again," I say.

The deafening sound rings throughout the house once more. It warps in and out of language. A deep bellowing shout: my mother's wretched laughter, piercing screeches, a false apology. Lucy, she's asking something of me. A song is ringing out, but I cannot place it, someone is crying, Mitsy is screeching now. I hear a siren somewhere in the distance; Lou, the neighbor, has been having scares lately. Simone's voice is asking me about a party; isn't she too old for parties? Lucy, again, she is asking me a question, I never could answer her questions. My mother is whispering again; "You've made such a mess, Bunny." The glass is shattering, again and again. Liquid is dripping onto the floor. Then, a broken voice silences it all. "Mom?"

It's Eileen.

A Narcissist's POV, Sierra Kallio

Moonflower

Asher Albera

Sometimes I lay down on the floor. The rough material of the carpet scratching my cheeks, my knees pressed against my chest. 'Fetal position' they call it, and yet my fingers hold my shoulders so tight I fear my knuckles will give in and break—snapping one by one until I'm left there bloodied and lifeless, staining that ugly, beige flooring that's keeping me from drowning into the depth of the earth. There's nothing about birth here, nothing about life.

I wonder what it feels like to be at home in your own body. Your own mind. Your own existence.

Does it take your breath away? Does it make everything easier? I like to think it does, so that maybe one day I won't have to make sure I'm breathing the right way, standing the right way, talking the right way. I've never loved myself—but I like to think that one day I will. Maybe one day life will seem like the best option.

Have you ever dreamed of a big accident? The bus flipping over at the intersection, a bomb taking down the airport, a doctor telling you it's terminal—only a few weeks left. Maybe some things are better left unsaid.

Sometimes I dream of flat chests and beards, other days I think of coffins and wet dirt staining white, beautiful moonflowers. Sometimes I draw stars and flowers on my skin, proof that I'm not a decomposing body, that something great can grow out of me. Sometimes I wonder who would come to my funeral—are people crying? Are they sobbing, falling to their knees and staining their clothes with damp grass, holding my hand so tight it would bruise if it had any blood left?

Is anyone looking at me and seeing the man I've been trying so hard to be?

I don't think I understand what I'm supposed

to do here. In my head, I'm just an alien that doesn't understand how humans live with each other, how they communicate, how they form relationships, how they love and care.

It's exhausting thinking you're not worth a life. You don't deserve it, someone else should take it. It's exhausting. And while I dream of undertakers and funeral homes, I also dream of the sun kissing my skin, a day of peace, a day with no horrors.

Can you think of a perfect day? A day where the sky was blue, and you didn't want to crawl out of your skin and bones?

I find myself thinking about it, longing for it. Do I not deserve it? Why do you feel safe in your body? Why can't I have it?

My fingers shake with jealousy. I would do anything. I see myself thrashing on the ground, digging with my bare hands just to get it, blood and dirt mixing underneath my nails. I long, and long, and long. I beg. Nothing happens. I hear a laugh in the distance.

In the morning I wake up and I mourn the man I saw in my dreams. Toned stomach, strong arms, long fingers, broad shoulders. I guess some people never get what they want.

In the morning I wake up and stare. I stare at the mirror, even when all I want to do is look away and run. How do I tell my parents I want to change the body they gave me? The body they created just for me. It feels wrong.

It feels wrong, but nothing is worse than waking up and realizing. Realizing that I'm dreaming at night, but that my nightmares follow me into the day. Every day, all day.

I close my eyes and pretend I'm not there. I let my voice get lost in between the halls. I never cared enough to speak louder because I never thought I was worth listening to.

Maybe I should've said something before I ended up raising myself, before I found myself staring at the blood on my fingers, wishing I could be someone else or nothing at all.

How do you build a family? How do you surround yourself with people that love you unconditionally? Sometimes I think I'm learning, I see the dream come true: you call me boy, you call me son, I follow blindly and I get my high on peace. Then I wake up, and the fog is back—I'm rotting on the floor again.

Am I dreaming? Am I awake? I don't know anymore. Dreams and nightmares slip into my days and I can't tell which is which. I don't know which ones are killing me and which ones are keeping me alive.

Maybe they're one and the same. Maybe I just have to keep myself from drowning for a little longer, and one day I won't have to scream at nightmares, because that's all they will be—a forgotten fantasy.

Seige, Isabella Spiess

Strange Fixtures

Victor Stoesz

Dreams to me are mainly
unwelcome spirits.
In my dreams, I chase things
I've already lost.

I pursue my late paternal figure,
one whose name I've all but forsaken.
A coffin manifests in front of me.

They load it into an unfamiliar car,
and I am small again.
My six-year-old self clambers into our Honda Pilot,
straining to reach the gas.

I tear after the hearse
across a highway bridge.
My car hurtles over the side, as I Too Fast

Tu
rn too hard

Plunge
Over
The edge

toward the labyrinthine
offramps and exits...

I'm back at the start.
My father stands upright in the back
of an open semi trailer,
his harrowed corpse sails behind
like a ribbon sash.
I floor the gas.
This carries on until I wake up.

Eight is the year
I went to Disney
for a whole week.
Something I'd wanted
my entire young life.

A psychic told me his spirit lingered
until I was about eight years old.

It may have been a cold read,
but there is some comfort in believing
that part of him did stay.

I carry with me the man who slept on trains while backpacking in Europe.
I carry a man who mixed dolls and pirates.
I carry the man who taught me to read.
And I sometimes worry that I scare my mother
by carrying that piece that lies in me. His dramatis persona.

This devotion is not rational, and yet it persists in my subconscious.
I do not wish to reopen these chapters of my life,
only to express the trapping sensation of one's own
strange fixtures upon a mental matrix.

Apocalypse

Rachel Huberty

the morning after the apocalypse begins,
my father will still roll his waste bins out
to the curb but won't notice how the other
townhomes along the narrow drive haven't.
he will whistle with the birds. he'll text
me,
then call and leave a voicemail, then call again.
he'll feel content, despite everything. he'll sit
on his patio and pray the Rosary. this I know.

the morning after the apocalypse begins, my
mother will try to reach me, maybe even
brave the roads and drive into the city for me
à la "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."
she'll need to hear my voice and want to touch
my hair, my face. when we reunite she'll cry
but be happy. she won't let go. this I know.

the morning after the apocalypse begins,
my brother will efficiently arrange his
large collection of tools from most to least
useful
and maybe remember to take his medication.
he'll want to know the schedule of things, what
comes next when. he'll hunker down and over
inflate his chances of survival, but he'll factor my
parents and I into his calculations. this I know.

the morning after the apocalypse begins, I'm not
sure what I'll do. I imagine that my body will
wake itself up at its usual time and I'll go about
my morning all while avoiding looking outside.
I'll
call my parents, light a candle, write something,
drink water, read, pray, bake banana bread, check
the news just to have something to be mad at. this
I know.

but I do hope, despite and in the midst of it all,
that I'll have found some kind of peace by the t
ime day breaks that morning, and that I'll have
enough faith in the world to see the apocalypse
through.

Beaver Moon

Emily Riemer

The ghosts of summer's flowers crowd the path before me,
all swollen seed pods and desiccated umber husks
and brittle snapping shucks.
Wind creeps between wilt and worm,
with the cloying musk of rot, of wet leaves,
of aster and snakeroot gone heady and sweet.

The seed pods rustle and clamor,
clinging burrs to my legs,
running their stamens over their maws,
whispering in shriveled voices:

"Under the cold beaver moon I slept,
and I dreamed of vastness.

"Not of seeds and petals,
not of cold blue slumber.

"I yearn for sprouts,
for bushing, spreading roots uninhibited,
to turn my face to a dizzying ultramarine sky."

But for now I wait,
cocooned, encapsulated,
singing, growing, dreaming,
glume without gloom.

i pull my withered petals around me like a blanket

and i metamorphosize.

Conatus

Mahdi Khamseh

and then they will say: speak to us as you speak in silence (like the hairs of darkness that are blanched at dawn). it happens to be necessary that this language awaits me, somewhere, I need to go, I want to go—but this long trip, what promise can my eyes recognize in between one mad state and another? I will think of silence then, I will feel the same pain, the same fatigue, struggle, then I will die of it (of suffering? of my own thirst?)—then that brown gaze will listen to abandonment, amend recognition, it will make the day break from the clam of dawn, then the pearl of the sun will sink back into the blue silence of the night. but I am here, again, drunk on the voice of another figure, the figure of another voice. I made love to the horrors of a foreigner, mortified: this land does not grow in me, this land does not open me. then naked again, the body bends (like the gullet of a dried stream): my sleep is sobbing, I can feel the form of my face in my thigh—teeth do not forget forbidden griefs—the whale of madness draws my water apart. my brain cries. I can feel the apparition wash up on the archaic sand of my heart and there, it opens, a laceration, the old dogs that died in the snow, the tongue of a mother that I never had, absence builds trenches in those eyes, the nature of light bends upon my arrival, breathes in an unfathomable sacrifice, exhales like the slow wilting of a watch: I spoke to you in silence and you responded with the great oath of forgetting.

The Gateway to the World, Annabel Russell-Pribnow

And Suddenly It Feels Real That You Are Dead

Neva White

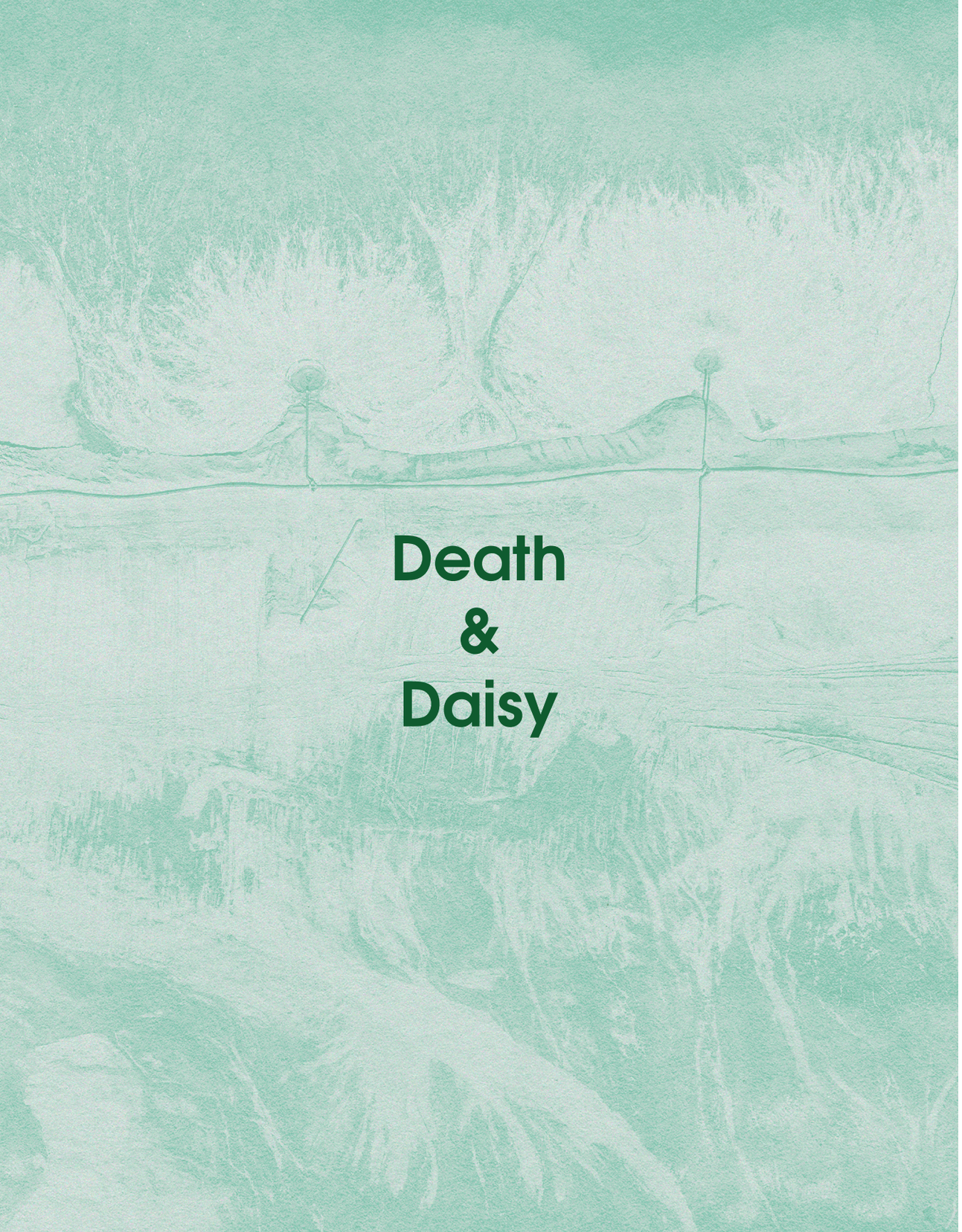
I am finding solace in the dark
swirling Superior waves
that I could comfortably drown myself in.
Facing the sharp winds with an open mouth,
allowing it to shove
bugs and
sand down my throat.

I could so easily be suffocated.

It seems like everyone is taken from me,
while I am merely taking more than prescribed.
I clean under my fingernails and I get
hard
crusted
blood on my bedsheets,
which helps me confuse my dreams with the
illusion of being awake,
because it's easier that way.

My body rises,
forgetting I was ever asleep.
My mind snapping back into reality
just as quick as your neck
snapped
when you hit the shower floor.

Tears, Zoë Meyer



Death & Daisy

Macky Conlin

Death stood in the soft white serenity of the meeting place. Clear water coated the ground he stood on, reflecting only his own image, because in this place there was nothing. His face was covered with a black veil. He would always wait here.

A small figure appeared before him. A little girl. From the looks of it, she couldn't be more than seven or eight years old. Her hair was braided in two pigtails, and one of her front teeth was missing. These cases were always the hardest; they never got easier for Death. Usually they would scream or cry and try to run away. They didn't like facing him. He was patient with them, but it still stung a little each time someone showed just how much they hated Death.

He waited for the inevitable reaction but soon realized this child was not like the others. She just stood there and looked at him, unlike any other person to have crossed his path before.

He noticed she had dirt underneath her fingernails and was soaking wet from head to toe. He wanted to be really careful not to scare her now. Hesitantly, Death made the first move.

"Hello, little one." Death greeted, his voice was deep and hoarse.

Dammit, he thought. That was terrible, she's going to start crying any minute now. God, I'm such a fuckup.

The little girl laughed. "You sound funny!"

Death was shell-shocked; no one had ever laughed at him before.

The little girl's laughter continued to echo throughout the serene nothingness. Her sneakers sparkled and lit up the water with different colors.

"What's your name?" Death asked.

"Daisy, like the flower," she responded, playing with her braided pigtails. She didn't seem to care that she was no longer in the woods behind her house, playing with the bugs and the critters that roamed the soft ground beneath her feet.

"That's a nice name," Death replied. He wasn't sure where to go from here. Most of the time people either were old enough that they immediately accepted it was their time or resisted him so much that he'd have to basically drag them on to the next existence. But this open enjoyment at the sight of him wasn't something Death could have ever anticipated. For the first time in centuries, his hands began to shake. He had forgotten what it was like to feel nervous. He wanted to make her be okay, to make sure she felt safe, but he knew there were a million ways he could mess that up.

"Do you know where you are? Do you remember anything that happened before you got here?" Death asked.

"I was looking for rocks in my backyard—I do that a lot. Then I saw a frog and I wanted to catch it! I tried to get it, but it jumped into the pond and I tried to grab it in the water but I think I missed. That water was cold!" She explained.

Looking at the soaking wet girl before him, Death had figured out the gist of what had happened to her. That was why she was here in front of him, drenched in the liquid that had taken her from the life she can never go back to.

"You're tall. My dad is tall too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm cold, do you have a blanket or hot chocolate? In the winter my mom always makes me hot choccy!"

"Here, let me help." Death waved his dark, cloaked hand over her and, like magic, she was dry again.

"Woahhhh! How did you do that! That's so cool—are you a wizard?"

"Not exactly." Death laughed, a real authentic laugh. God, how long has it been since I've felt like this?

"You're cool and all, mister, but I think it's probably time for lunch, and my mom gets mad when I'm late. So I have to go home now."

Daisy finally started to take in the scene around her, or lack thereof. Her face twisted into a confused expression, and she looked as if she was going to cry. Her head darted around the space, searching for anything that looked familiar, anything that resembled home.

Death quickly crouched in front of her and gently lay his hand on her cheek. "Hey, don't worry. You're okay, I promise."

"But, I have to go home now. My mom is making mac n' cheese."

"Is that your favorite?"

"No, pizza is my favorite, but I like mac n' cheese too."

Death let out a sigh. How the fuck am I supposed to tell this little girl that she can't go home for lunch and that her mother is probably hysterical at the loss of her as we speak?

"I'm sorry, but you can't go back home."

"Why not?"

"It's a lot to explain, but just know that you're going to be okay."

Daisy calmed down, taking in everything that she had been told. She played with the straps of her overalls.

"If I can't go home, can I stay with you?"

***

Death and Daisy walked together through the woods behind her house, Death tightly holding her hand so he wouldn't lose her. It was late September now and the leaves were turning to different shades of autumn as they, too, began to die. They weren't really there, but Daisy wanted to see this all again, so Death made it for her.

"One time, I was back here with my sister and I caught a lizard."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I named him Lizzy because that's my sister's name and because he was a lizard. My sister didn't like that. I kept Lizzy in my room as a pet but then he died. That was sad."

"I'm sorry he died."

"Me too. I miss him sometimes."

Death let go of Daisy's hand and crouched down to her face.

"I'll be right back. Stay here for me, okay?"

"Okay!"

Daisy stood there and waited. She picked at the patch of a daisy on the front pocket of her overalls. Her sister had given it to her for Christmas last year.

"Get it? Cause your name is Daisy!" she had said.

Daisy had her mom sew it to her favorite pair of overalls that same night. She started to get a weird feeling in her chest. It hurt now, thinking about her sister and her mom. It didn't hurt

before.

Soon, Death returned. His scythe was now hanging on his back and he had his hands cupped together in front of him.

"Okay, Daisy, close your eyes and hold out your hands."

Daisy did as he asked and suddenly felt something being put into her hands. It was small and squirming a little.

"Okay, now open."

She opened her eyes and, in the palm of her hands, was Lizzy the lizard. Daisy let out a shrill squeal of joy. She jumped up and down, giggling at the sight of her old pet.

Death had never brought anyone happiness like this before. It felt good.

"You like it?" Death asked, smiling. Daisy continued to laugh and play with Lizzy. Death just watched, enjoying the sight of Daisy so happy, and that he was the reason for that happiness.

Then he felt an unbearable sense of guilt. He was supposed to have brought her to the next life by now, not sit in the made-up woods behind her house. There were other people he had to guide. Although he had never signed up for this job, he couldn't abandon it as he didn't exist outside of this role.

***

When Steven woke up, the first thing he noticed was how cold it was. He was shaking like crazy and he could hear the chattering of his teeth echo around him. That was when he noticed the looming figure in front of him, tall and dark. There was a scythe in his left hand and his face was covered. No, God please, no.

Steven began to cry, scream, and plead for his life. He was only thirty-three years old. He had just gotten married and wasn't ready to leave yet. As he backed away from the figure, his eyes fell to the smaller one holding the figure's hand. The first thing he noticed was her sneakers. They were light-up Skechers, flashing blue, green, and red on the reflective surface of the ground. His niece had a pair of shoes like that too.

"Don't be scared, you're safe now." she said to him.

"Wh-who are you? Where am I?"

"You're in the light place—at least that's what I call it. This is Jeff, I don't know his name but I call him Jeff, right Jeff?"

"Right." Death replied, looking softly at Daisy and squeezing her hand.

"M-My wife, is she okay? Where is she?"

"She's back on earth. She's okay, or she will be after a while." Death assured.

"No… Please, I can't leave her. I love her so much."

"I know… I'm sorry. I wish I could help, but I can't," Death spoke. "We wouldn't be here in front of you if there was still something that could be done."

Steven sat there and wailed as he buried his face into his hands.

Slowly, Daisy made her way up to him. With each soft step, her sneakers continued to spread colored light to the area around her.

"Wanna hold Lizzy?"

Steven glanced up to see Daisy with her hands cupped together in front of his face. In them was a little green lizard. She gently set the tiny creature into his hands, and he watched as the lizard squirmed around before settling down in the palm of his hand. Death admired her as she calmed Steven down with an effortlessness that he could never attain. He used to think himself selfish for keeping this little girl as a friend, for having held tight to her because she had brought him the first semblance of happiness he had experienced in centuries.

But as Daisy continued to share her light-up Skechers with the rest of the souls who found themselves before them, Death could see that the universe had given her as a gift not just for him, but also for others. Now he didn't have to carry this burden alone.

On Water

Kate Jackson

We who walked on water today
Toward some soft mirrored edge

We are still, silent in the approach
Crescent cutting a bracing dusk
Swaddled in
Womb of atmosphere, fog of breath
We see far from this lifeboat
Into the pink and gray

Every branch and stone must be a bead strung
Heavy on the neck of dark water
Memory of wail and lapping shore

I've been in this place before
Tipping in a boat with my father
His face fading in and out
His memory a tangle
Bundle of dying flowers in my arms

How can we love what is dead?
I still think of Arthur McBride
Truly, he must be my first cousin
His rapier still rolling in the tide
How can we love the bright tones
Of this fugitive morning?
When we squeeze so hard
Plumbing the slurry of our hearts
Wet earth extruded through fingers
Rendered unrecognizable on the other side

Here at the end of the world
There is no tidal wave
Suspended, roiling
We arrive instead to find
The only door, one of our own making
The blackened trees, too, where flames have been
Waxen cones that remember too well their pyre
The hiss and song of the burning

In the end there is so much symmetry
Etched out in unbearable relief
A stone that appears out of nowhere
So many limbs feathering down into the depths

City of Illusion, L. H. Cheung

I'll Show You in the Morning

Macky Conlin

I awoke enveloped in white linen. I knew you were there even before I turned to face you. The wall past you was made entirely of glass. I had no recollection of where we were, and the view outside offered little explanation. Instead I was met with a painfully beautiful sky. Strokes of blood red embroidered an expanse of milky violet unlike any I had ever seen. The image evoked a tight feeling at the back of my throat, leaving me nearly breathless. You were resting peacefully, without making a sound. I didn't want to disturb you, so I took a picture to show you when you woke up. I stared at the outside until it lulled me back to where I began, in bed next to you.

I awoke again with effort, struggling to raise myself from bed to silence my alarm. I was now confined in gray cotton sheets, the ones that were painfully truly my own. I seemed to recall a feeling that I was once somewhere else, and it almost felt like you were there with me, as funny as that sounds. I tried quite hard to recall exactly what happened, but as if I were trying to keep hold of a handful of sand in a flowing river, the memory slipped from my mind.

My day then shifted from one action to the next as I dressed myself and carried on with my morning routines. On the bus to class I couldn't shake the feeling that I was just with you, even though I knew that couldn't be the case. How many times have I passed by you, heard your shoes against the pavement as they passed me, and taken in your fleeting scent hoping I could once again greet you in the same way I once did?

It was the second week back on campus and I was still a little confused as to where my first class was, so I went to look in my photos to where I had my schedule saved, and it was then that I saw it. That red and that purple, how they were royally painted across that early morning sky, it was a sight so arresting it couldn't have been of this earth. At once it all came back to me. You were there, weren't you? I took this picture for you, and yet I feel like it wouldn't fall upon welcoming eyes if I showed it to you the way I intended. But isn't it so beautiful? Doesn't it make you want to forget everything you know, everything that's happened? Doesn't it make you hunger for love?

The ground below me rumbled. I was laid supine upon a platform within some great moving metal beast. You were lying in the bed across the cabin from me, your face tangled within your arms, your hair splayed out across the pillow. And though it was soft, I could just hear your light snoring above the gentle rolling of the train. I tried to go back to sleep but I found myself unable. I checked my phone to see that it was far into the night, and as I climbed out of bed and looked out the cabin window all I saw was the black expanse of the sky over the dark green rolling fields. I seemed to have forgotten where we were headed to, but I was happy as long as I was with you. Exiting the cabin, I passed slowly through the long, narrow halls of the train until I reached a car where they were serving concessions even through the late night.

I felt a yearning for warmth and for solace and so I opted for ginger honey tea. The man behind the counter waved my hand away as I took out my card. He told me that it was no problem, that my money was no good to him, and so I put it away after a moment. He was so kind to me, I'll tell you about it in the morning. After some blowing to make sure it wouldn't burn my tongue, I took that first sip of the tea. It was so wonderful, you would love it. Although it was made of physical materials, it tasted like sunlight. The honey filled my senses with warm air and the ginger kicked through my throat like summer heat. I'm telling you, this tea was unlike anything you've ever tasted, I promise. How lucky I felt to be alive at that moment. Everything felt like it meant something, that there was meaning to all of it if it led to this. And to be able to share it all with you—what a life I've been given. It would mean so much to me if we could come here again tomorrow. I need you to know this feeling, to taste this heaven with me. I worried that I wouldn't remember this all in the midst of all the excitement we must have planned for tomorrow, so I wrote in my phone to bring you to the dining car, and to order two ginger honey teas. I traced my steps back to our room and I climbed back into bed. I watched your resting figure sway up and down softly with your breaths until I too joined you in sleep.

You were there again last night, weren't you? I felt a great emptiness as I rose out of bed. I know you were there, you must have been. It had been a few nights since the last time I dreamt of you and so I worried you would never again return, but you were there last night, I'm sure of it. I could just barely still feel it, that rumbling ground, that euphoric taste. What was it, what was it that I wanted to tell you in the morning? What was so important, what made me so happy, what thing was it that pained me to know that I had experienced it without you and knew I had to share it with you? I went to my photos and there was nothing new. It couldn't have been right. Why wouldn't I have left some sort of mark, some indication that I was with you once again? It wasn't fair. I wanted to be with you all the time, not only when I was asleep.

You don't know how happy we could be together. On that train, I felt nothing but bliss. You should know what it is that you are missing, what sort of love you could experience. Not just for me but for life itself. It is all there for you, it all could be real couldn't it? Don't you want that? It can't only be me.

Can I give that to you, will you allow me? I know I have ruined myself in your eyes, but you should know that I'm not who you think I am. How could I not be enough when I can share with you the essence of joy itself? I need to know what it was, I need to feel it again so I know it exists.

I was getting late for class but it didn't matter much to me anymore. I rifled through my pictures, voice memos, texts I sent, and finally I had reached it as I opened my notes app. The sunlight crept back up through my throat and filled my mouth once again. The ginger honey tea, it was so beautiful. We must have been on a train together if I had gotten it from a dining car. What a life we must have lived together! We were taking a trip in our other life, we must have been so excited, right? Or perhaps we were moving, starting a new life together in a place far from home? I know that wherever we were going

I must have been so contented to be going there with you.

Didn't you deserve to know what it is we are getting up to over there? I know you must be having the same dreams too. They may not even be dreams. Perhaps as we slept we simply dove into a life we shared together in some other world, some other time. I knew you must feel this same happiness I do, and it could all be real. You could feel that happiness with me. Please, believe me when I tell you about all that I have experienced. It could make you so happy too.

It's morning now, I can tell from the glow filtering in through the window. I find myself in quite a haze. I can't remember much, but I can tell that this bed we're sharing now is ours, and this room is one we must call home. A cup stands on my bedside table, it smells faintly of ginger. I'll wash it in a second—I just want to enjoy this sunny weekend morning here in bed with you. You face away from me, on the side of the bed closer to the window. The left side was always yours, no matter which bed we slept in. Remember that hotel near the seaside, the one with the beautiful skies? How long ago was that? It feels like forever. You're pretty quiet. Not to poke too much fun at you, but you usually snore a bit, especially in the mornings. It's funny though, now that I'm thinking about it you don't actually snore that much, and the more I think about it maybe you never snored at all.

The bathroom door is in a different place than I thought it'd be. It's no big deal, I know we just moved recently. But still, I could have sworn it was never that far from the door out to the hallway. You made fun of me once, didn't you? I was always the forgetful one.

And what were you? You never made fun of me for that, I never used to forget anything. It just feels like now when I think back, everything before a certain time always feels a little like a dream. You didn't really like me back then, did you? But look at us now, isn't this life we share together so wonderful? Still, remember that time we didn't talk for a while? I swear, there were times where it felt like we never even knew each other, that's how far apart you felt from me, even when you were so close I could have reached out and touched you. Remember when I told you about those dreams I had, the ones where we were together? I told you about the photos I had taken in them, and about the things I wanted you to experience with me. You looked at me as if I were insane. I still can't seem to ever shake that look from my head.

I remember you didn't talk to me for a while after that. I tried to reach out to you and you never returned any of my messages. Now that I think about it, I can't really seem to remember what happened after all of that which finally brought us together again. You must have had those dreams too, right? You must have felt what it is I'm feeling now, and known that I was telling you the truth, that this was what was meant for us. Still, I don't remember when you reached out to me again. I guess it was so long ago that it's hard to place the exact details.

The smell of ginger is a little stronger now. The cup was empty before but now it's filled to the brim. The tea bubbles over and spills across the table. I try to drink it to make sure it doesn't make too much of a mess but it's too hot. The tea lights up my entire mouth, and it feels as though I just swallowed a lit cigarette. I set the cup back on the table and cover it with a book but it's not enough to stop the tea from rising and pouring out onto the table, eventually onto the floor. The smell of ginger now seizes the entire room. I watch as it gushes in from the windows and from the cracks in both doors. The floors are flooded up to about half a foot. I know I need to wake you up, we have to get out of here before we too are swallowed up in the rising tide, but I know what it'd mean to do so. Can't I just stay here longer with you? It's awful that it must end so soon. Maybe one day I'll awaken next to you again, but I know now has got to be the last time. I can't keep you trapped like this, it's not right.

I turn you over to face me and see what I've always known. Your face is empty, you were never there. I take a picture, and then I wake up.

Rinse and Repeat, Ella Leidy

Blue Hair Makes Me Cry

Samantha Bergren

It's November. I'm sitting on the bus with a boulder lodged in my throat as I stare at a complete stranger and their bright blue hair a few feet away from me. I guess I must have thought it was you…even though I know daylight doesn't bring people back.

But the night does. I remember the first night you visited me. You had changed—I didn't know that was possible. I have to remind myself that it's not in the daylight. But at night you had changed and your hair was blue. An ocean draping over your face. Your embrace, like the waves of the deep sea, engulfed me. I began to drown in the salty sorrow that washed over my body. Each tide rolled in to water your funeral flowers before I awoke in a puddle of blue. Blue, blue hair.

Your hair was not blue, but dark, the very last time I saw you. Black flashes like smoke whipped by my face as you danced next to me in the front row. I would follow your bold lead as we screamed over the crowd to guitar chords of a ghost that no longer exists. in the silence of a space now haunted without your presence.

I await frozen here, looking for you at bus stops and concert venues. When I close my eyes at night, I'm waiting there too. In that place with blue saltwater burning in my eyes until the next time you visit. I hope you look different. Maybe someday purple hair will make me cry instead.

Gruel

Philip Toweh

i heard a bug misleading itself: “love hides behind the sun.”
maybe so, but this is not the sun. this is my lampshade.
and now you look confused—wings betrayed by
your carnal simplicity. but that’s okay.
cling to my finger. here is my balcony.
here’s a bit of direction blown through my pucker.

small wanton acts of mercy to dissuade murder’s allure
during the times when i’m enchanted by the angel of death.
it’s a wicked blessing; she sings my mind black misty
and adorns me with the benevolence of pious evil.
she says to me: “go and enact god’s vengeance,”
and i have to abandon mirrors and other people.
she sings my mind black misty and i have to stay indoors.

i’m gnashing on an apple to appease the temptation.
its bitten edge looks magical,
like the ruins of a city on an ocean cliff,
going out in fire or upside down candles strung to trees—
a safe haven for the forsaken where falling wax brings
the mercy of a lesser pain. and they are singing
and they are beautiful in their loneliness
and here comes my teeth.

Under My Baggy Garments

Ava Jax

She left my porch light on, dimmed. She slunk away to her home, away. Lectures on syntax impressed her. Words from my mouth used to tangle our tongues. Now, my lips lay dry and phraseless.

These days, I find myself desiring, sweltering. A humid disposition, one I inherited on my own And share with no one.

And so without her
I steep tea in bed, tangling my thighs in the sheet, hair and hot water in the pillow, untangled—tangled all over again. I wear lingerie under my baggy garments, tattered overcoats. I annotate rough draft screenplays. I flirt with every Trylon employee, snickering beneath the big screen. I see both men and women stare at me, laugh as if I didn’t notice, but I do. I always do. I feel someone wrap hands around my hip bones. I move closer, belt pressed against me as we dance. I do ballet. I drink wine while humming songs of plums and wrought friendships. I let the pulpiness of heartbreak sink into my mattress, sing my inebriated mind to sleep. I deliver phantom words.

Tender Plums (inspired by Stein’s Tender Buttons*)

A plum is a density. Plum pit core.
Stringy liquid mass consumes the mantle.

The crust is a tight latex balloon.
Stretched taut taut stretched. Creaseless. Gashes plunge the plum, bloody gums.

It is sodden it is enjoyed it is blue beet stains.
Pit discarded. Mass implodes. Soil elicits a core rebirth.

*The parentheticals ruin the formatting of the title, however, to not give credit would be unlike me. You always liked that I provide citations.

If only I could slow my blood flow. Oh, to stop the hemorrhaging from draining me. It is false that pain is best treated through time and medication. Remedy lies in self-extravagance, over-indulgence, in the festered carpet blood, in her interest in lectures on syntax. We look at each other through mutilated lenses. Her face reflects every shade of mustard. One day she’ll leave my porch and slink into my subconscious. One day these won’t be broodings they’ll just be old thoughts.

I Used to Look Behind Me, Marie Ronnander

A Block Away

Marshall Douglas

THE KID MUST THINK I'M STUPID. He don't know yet I know he knows I'm two months sober. I didn't know he knew what sober meant until Gemma said to me, two mornings ago, she told him about my drinking. Gemma said she only told it to him because it's a good lesson for him to know I'm only allowed back around because I've been clean.

Clean.

Sober.

These are words a kid his age shouldn't know in the way my kid knows them, but he has me to thank for that.

"Dad," he says.

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"Yeah, what is it, Chiquito?" I ask.

His name is Bobby, but I always call him Chiquito like Papá did me.

"I know the way from here," he says.

The city bus let us off a little more than a half mile west of the school. I'm always testing him on cardinal directions, and he always does good. He's growing so fast.

"I'm sure you do, Chiquito, but I told your mom I would take you the whole way to school like she does."

We're barely twenty steps from the bus stop. We still have the lion's share of our walk ahead of us and he's already trying to ditch me.

"It's okay," he says. "I have to grow up

sometime. Isn't that what you're always saying, Dad?"

Bobby is smart. He's only nine but understands things I don't remember understanding until I was much older than he is now. (But what does anyone remember from when they were nine? Gemma remembers everything I ever did, though. Likes to throw it back at me after I dry out from a long night. Sometimes she finds it funny. Sometimes she don't.) Anyway, Bobby sometimes likes to use what I say against me to get what he wants. And that's okay when it don't hurt my feelings, when he's just hustling me for extra butter pecan ice cream or to stay up later, but trying to ditch me at the bus stop when he knows I'm supposed to walk with him the whole way to that prissy school he goes to—that hurts my feelings. But I can't show it.

"No," I say. "I'm going to walk you to the door to be sure you make it all the way. Some people are crazy, Chiquito. You know that?"

Bobby shakes his head at me like I'm making it all up.

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"I'm serious," I say. "When I was your age, guys in vans with no windows would snatch kids like you away from their parents when them kids was just walking to school."

(Gemma is always saying I shouldn't scare the kid, but he has to learn sometime.)

"You mean like when the abuelos pick me up? But they don't have a van; their car is tiny. They don't have a huge bus like you." He opens his arms real big when he says this to demonstrate just how huge my bus is. "I always get smushed behind New Abuelo—between his seat and the empty laundry basket that's always in back there." The kid looks confused. "Like that, Dad? Is that snatched? Like when they pick me up?"

(Chiquito has two abuelos now since an aneurysm stole Mamá away and freed Papá to sit mi hermana, Carmen, and me down to say, 'You kids love me. That's what matters.' Coolest thing in the world to Bobby, having two grandpas. I think so, too. Papá is happy, and I know Mamá would just be glad Arthur isn't some twenty-eight-year-old undergrad with dreadlocks sprouting from her armpits.)

"No, Chiquito, not like the abuelos. I mean snatch like that time you stole gummy worms from Señor Prieto's bodega. Remember that? He was good to you when we brought them back. Better than most would have been. He still lets me sweep for cash. Sometimes."

"I love gummy worms," he says.

"You sure do, Chiquito."

We can see the school from where we're walking. The sidewalk is crowded with snow. Some people don't shovel their snow, which I find inconsiderate. And my sandals don't do so good on that snow that's packed so hard it's like glass coated with baby oil. It's like I'm ice skating, only I don't want to be.

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"Dad."

"Yeah, Chiquito."

"Sometimes Bobby F., the other Bobby in my class, the one you haven't met yet because Mom always brings me since you're never around much—"

Kid takes his punches where he can. Learns that from his mom.

"The other Bobby's mom lets him walk to school by himself, from their house all the way."

"Is Bobby F.'s mom your mom or me?"

I got him on this one. I know I do because Papá used to say stuff like this to me when I got lippy, and I never had nothing I could say back.

"No," he says. "Better."

Goddamn kid is vicious. I know that comes from his mom.

As we get closer to the school, the sidewalks are all cleared, straight lines on both sides— all done up by snowblowers. These houses are nicer than the one we live in. We live across town, twenty-seven minutes by bus—fourteen stops. Looking around, I'm thinking our entire apartment could fit in the living room of any one of these big places. Thank God for pity. And thank God for diversity and inclusion statistics too. Bobby got into this school on a scholarship. He looks real good in the school's marketing packet.

It's nice here: plenty of money, education is good. The school is big. One of those Romanesque buildings that looks like an old church only it ain't. The school doesn't have no theology classes or nothing. I wouldn't go for that. Where was God when I got caught up in the

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drinking? Where was God when CPS tried to take Bobby from Gemma and me? And why didn't God come find me when he was handing out these big goddamn houses? Wasn't like I was too busy to hear him out about one of these big houses, but he wasn't looking for me on them days, so I don't want my kid looking for him when he's just trying to get an education.

"Look, Chiquito, starting next year maybe you can walk yourself from the bus stop," I say. "You at least have to be tall enough to ride roller coasters if you're going to walk yourself to school."

"That doesn't seem fair," he says. "What if I never grow up like Tío Cliff didn't?"

(Cliff isn't his real uncle but just a guy I know from drinking. Cliff might be a dwarf, but he ain't never said nothing about it, and I ain't never asked. He's a good dude.)

"No way," I say, laughing. "You got my genes."

"Is that why you're wearing sweatpants?"

This throws me off. Again with the punches, goddamn kid.

"What's wrong with my sweats?" I say.

I know what's wrong with my sweats: they didn't come from that shoe store at the mall where the guys working there wear jerseys like they're goddamn referees. I got mine free when I was in rehab. There ain't no name on them—not on the front, not down the leg, not on the tag. To be honest, there ain't no tag. This fact, for Bobby, makes my sweats intolerable.

This pisses me off.

"You know, Chiquito," I say. "Your mom and me work real damn hard to make sure you can have the things you want." And because I know he don't always get the things he wants, I add, "As much as we can."

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"I know," he says. "It's okay if you get yourself something too."

This makes me laugh. I tousle his hair.

"One day you're going to be somebody," I say. "You know that, Chiquito?" "I am somebody," he says. "Aren't I?"

In front of the school, there's a group of kids having a snowball fight. They must have shown up to school twenty minutes early. I never did that. (I bet Bobby F. is in this group.) I can tell the kid is excited to see the other kids there. I'm thinking it might be an excellent idea for Bobby and me to join in. Maybe we can show these two-comma sissies how we throw snowballs in the barrio, but I'm not wearing a jacket, only the big T-shirt I wear when I make spaghetti. (I made spaghetti last night. It was good.) I suggest it to Bobby anyway.

"You want me to show you and your friends what a real snowball fight looks like?" "No," the kid says.

This stings too.

We're a block away now and though I know he's been trying to get me to stay the hell away from his school, I been trying to get him to not be so ashamed of his old man. It ain't like I'm one of those dudes in a van snatching kids. He shouldn't care so much what I'm wearing or that it's ten degrees out and I'm not wearing a jacket, but I know he'd have to answer to these kids for me not wearing a jacket. It's so cold. It won't make sense to nobody I'm out here without a jacket. The bus driver looked at me funny too, but whatever. I only got the one jacket. It's one of those racing jobs that has BUDWEISER plastered all over it. And since the school caught wind of my escapades—because Gemma told them—I didn't think it such a good idea to show up here advertising.

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We stop on the corner.

"You know, Chiquito," I say, "I know you're embarrassed by your old man right now, and maybe I got that coming. I bet sometimes you dream of what it would be like if your old man wasn't me but one of them business dudes and that you lived with that dude, your mom, maybe a brother or sister or two, and a dog in one of them big houses instead of with me part-time where I sleep. I get it. If I was you I'd probably wonder that too." He don't say nothing to this. "Coming from where I'm from, Chiquito, I never dreamed—not until you came along. So, take a minute and breathe, take in this real air—it ain't make-believe. I know the air is cold and it stinks like a bastard sometimes but remember that if I ain't around no more you might want that I'm around." I pause to be sure some of what I'm saying is sinking in, for me if not him. "Dream, Chiquito. Dream bigger than your old man ever could. I've learned—and it wasn't no easy lesson, trust me—I learned that dreams are what keep us. They make us whole. My sponsor told me—"

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"A sponsor."

"A friend."

"Why not say, 'friend?'"

"My friend told me this thing that sticks. He says, and I may get this wrong but you'll get the picture, my friend says to me, "The tragedy isn't in dreaming. The tragedy is in dreaming an unworthy dream." I found out later he ripped it from Scott Fitzgerald, but it holds." At this point, the boy is just staring at me. I can't tell if it's sympathy or confusion. "What I'm trying to say, Chiquito, is don't dream low. You're worth more than that. And you can dream to be richer,

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smarter, or better looking than your old man but that don't mean you got to be embarrassed by me, or where you're from. Got that?"

This is a tough lesson before school on a Wednesday, but he has to grow up sometime. "I know, Dad," he says.

He hugs me. And this ain't one of them hugs to get me to shut up. It's warm. He can sense I'm hurt some and his instinct is to console me. I'm so proud.

"Just promise me when you grow up to be somebody you won't forget me." He grabs my hand and tugs me toward the school, but I don't budge.

"Go ahead," I say. "Have a good day; learn something. Just do me one favor, Chiquito," He looks at me earnestly. "Ball up one of them snowballs real tight." I show him with my hands how to shape the perfect snowball. "And when the time comes, let them kids have it. That goes for Bobby F. too. But listen, this is real important—don't go hitting nobody in the face. A snowball to the face stings. Bad. Trust me. We ain't trying to hurt no one, just trying to win. Hear me? Can you do that for me, Chiquito?"

He don't say nothing, only smiles at me.

Now, I don't know if the kid was playing me or not—just trying to get away so he don't get embarrassed no more than he already has been (I'm not too good at figuring him or his mom out)—but I decide I don't much care if he's playing me this time. I tuck that big T-shirt into my sweats to cut some of the arctic air from freezing me to death, pull my arms inside the shirt, and hug myself. And I don't hug myself because I'm emotional but because it's so cold out here it hurts. I stand there for nine-and-a-half minutes, shivering my ass off on that corner, just to watch Bobby go the rest of the way on his own.

lake ripples

Morgan McFadden

we wandered down \ to scry once more
the surface / greeted us by breaking
under guidance \ of the moon
with our feet / sinking into the silt
glazing past glass \ protected by shine

we found our futures / there on that shore
talking internally \ listening for answers
who knows what / they were told
but when the sky \ cleared up
and light began / breaking the surface once more
we bid goodbye \ fleeing towards home

Hidden Tiger, Boyu Wen

After the Noise is Gone

Keng Xiong

Every spring, underneath the same shade of the magnolia tree, I told Ma of the time I heard the heart of the ocean. Her smile opened in memory as she tied red ribbons and gold bells onto the branches.

You're still afraid of your own heartbeat, tub, she said. How could you bear to listen to the sounds of the world? Yet, she closed her eyes to listen as the bells tinkled from the wind. The ring carried below to a cascade of wildflowers flushed against the boulders, and I began to recall a home so many years ago.

. . . .

I didn't know what woke me up. Not the branch of the chestnut tree knocking against the kitchen window, not the coughing in the apartment room next door. Not even the bathroom shower that pattered against the plastic curtain for hours. What I was certain of was this: my body felt depleted, like a ship returning from the sea. And yet I couldn't find my way back to sleep.

I opened my eyes—a narrow beam of moonlight from the kitchen window cloaked itself against the xwm kab, the ancestral altar. The glow was haunting against the pink, white, and gold joss paper which framed an old family photo. A picture I knew by heart—the one where Dad and Shepherd shared a toothy grin, and Ma's hand grazed a golden ring, then me with my yellow earmuffs loose around my neck. Instinctively, I clutched the ring around my finger—Ma's gift of gold from their wedding at twenty, the ring Dad never took off.

I didn't know what compelled me, but I took off the covers and stepped over Shepherd's sleeping body. In the dark, I recalled where the floor creaked and cracked, careful to avoid toppling any cardboard boxes, and entered the kitchen only

a few steps away. Dad's boxes of things covered the table. There would be no point, Ma had said when Dad's boxes had finally come that morning, to unpack any of it because we'd be moving with her sister back to Minnesota by the end of the month. I spotted the stack of scented incense sticks still wrapped in the package and grabbed a lighter. I unlatched the kitchen window where the air was calm and lit the incense, a field of lemongrass wafting into memory as it grew into an orange-blue flame. I watched the smoke trail out into the night of Monterey—a flood of city lights ebbing alongside the rush of cars. I set it down and returned to the living room, opening the shades to let in the pale light. I submerged myself back into the thin layer of blankets where Shepherd was sprawled out in its caverns, his eyes open and awake, a deep muddy brown even in the low light.

Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. Should I close the curtains? I said starting to get back up. Shepherd could never sleep without a pile of blankets and the room being completely dark. But he shook his head as he wiped the sweat off his forehead, his long hair curling around his ears. Suddenly, the sound of the shower came to a stop and we both closed our eyes as if asleep. A beat later, the bathroom door opened, and Ma's footsteps walked out—stopped—then continued as she entered the only bedroom of the apartment. She closed the door. We lay in the silence of the humming vent. I was fourteen and he was ten, yet we both knew what sinking felt like. I opened my eyes and saw Shepherd with his eyes still closed. If Dad was there, he would have cupped his ears, like mine, and smoothed them over with his hands. Like your Ma's, he would've said. The softest, most delicate ears. But I wasn't Dad. Shepherd spoke first:

I don't want to go, he said. I like it here in Monterey.

And I knew that feeling all too well. Of wanting to stay. We had grown up in homes around California, and as the world began to fit on the lines of my palms, for him Monterey was still the center. Maybe mine too. It was closer to the aquarium and the ocean.

I think it'll be fun and new. Don't you remember when we visited the aquarium in Minnesota? I said. The one inside the largest mall in the world. We rode the teacups and the train with aunty and ate ice cream. We took pictures with the blue shark even though—

It was closed, I know. I remember, he said. But this one's home.

I promise you we'll go every weekend.

But that's too long.

I know. We'll be back before you know it, okay? How about this, I grabbed Dad's notebook from underneath my pillowcase. Let's map Monterey Bay the best we can, so when we come back, we can remember it. Everything, even the aquarium. Shepherd's eyes widened as he spotted the familiar stickers pasted on the blue cover.

Now, don't tell Ma I took this from the pile of boxes, I said as I flipped to the first page filled with Dad's handwriting. I turned to a blank page and wrote the words: Wonder Aquarium.

I slipped on my earmuffs and perched on the kitchen countertop, unlatching the window to let in the afternoon breeze. It wasn't much better than the air inside of the room, my shirt already sticking onto my skin, but it was still a breath away from dusty yellowed walls and cardboard boxes. From that height, everything in Monterey Bay was modest compared to the ocean. In the distance, a familiar line of boats and signal flags drifted across the horizon.

Look, Shepherd, signal flags. I pointed to the rows that spanned longer than I had ever seen before. They were a common sight during the last week of the month, when navy ships would pass the coast. A swarm of surfers and sailboats followed, crowds of people already gathered around the shore. The nighttime market would soon come alive with vendors setting up fresh fish and produce.

I wonder what they spell out, Shepherd said as he pulled a chair up against the counter. He pulled back his sleeved red shirt, rounding his hands into small binoculars. I shrugged, sketching them in the air.

Be careful boys, Ma said as she carried a box of leftover joss paper and ornaments onto the kitchen table. Earlier in a phone call with Puj, Ma had insisted that the xwm kab lay on the east wall, the side facing the bay. The ocean was a better view, Ma had said. He would want to see the water, not the sight of a front door. I laughed when she said this, Puj making the point that it wasn't about which looked better, but I knew Ma was being serious. She had spent hours setting it up, when before it would collect dust—she was never the most spiritual.

Ma dug into the box and pulled out a velvet red pouch carrying a wind chime. It was made of bamboo pipes that surrounded a silver bell, and as the bamboo clunked together, it made a sound of hollow wood followed by a sharp shimmering ring as the bell settled.

Can you tie this above the window, be gentle, she said. It's your Puj's.

I can do it, Shepherd said as he held out his hand. Shepherd clamped his hands around the chime and it dulled. He could barely reach the hook when standing, so I held onto his legs to make sure he wouldn't fall. When he finished, he jumped down.

Shepherd, don't jump onto the floor. There are people right below us— Ma began to say before she was cut off by a horn that blared from outside the window. My ears buzzed from the sound. It faded just as soon as it came. We glanced out the window.

If Dad was here, he'd know what that meant, Ma said. The flags. The horns. All of it, huh?

Even from there the wind lifted shouts and laughter as the line of boats stalled to a stop. I think even then we knew what it meant, but we stood to watch as a stream of bodies dove from the boats and into the water. Ma rubbed our heads.

You're getting too big, tub, she said. You're already taller than me. And she fixed my yellow earmuffs. Her lips parted to say more, then pursed. She looked at Shepherd, then said, It's been a while since we've been out. How about we finish with cleaning and then go to the bay? Ma put her arms on her waist. Maybe visit the aquarium?

Shepherd smiled and ran into the living room to

scoop up folded clothes littered on the ground. We hadn't been to the aquarium or the ocean since the beginning of the year. Before Ma went to put away the boxes, she checked my mosquito bites which were lathered with tiger balm, now cooled and sticky. She told me to wash up and walked to the bedroom. As I stood on the counter, I imagined myself getting ready to dive underneath the currents, knees sprung in launch position. Yet, before I could do so, Ma eyed me, and I stepped off instead.

My eyes began to sting even before I could hear the faint crashing of the waves. Whether it was my hands that were sticky from peeling sour oranges or the salty wind that blew out of the bay, I could not tell, but I restrained myself from rubbing my eyes further. By the time we reached the aquarium which laid beside the bay, the streetlamps glowed a soft amber. At the front entrance, Shepherd placed a palm against the glass. It was closed. We walked the rest of the way to the boardwalk in silence, the moon hidden behind clouds. Along the shore, people were huddled around bonfires, the sky a draped purple blanket. I slipped off my sandals, letting my feet sink beneath the cool sand. With my head down, I scanned the sand looking for shards of glass in between the dips and grooves. I often did this whenever we went to the bay. Behind me, Ma followed with a bag of towels, Shepherd already up ahead. When I reached the smooth wet sand, the foamy water creeping up to my toes, I looked up. If it were not for the boats and their lights emanating from afar, the ocean and sky melded together, like two hands in one.

I gave Ma my earmuffs and the paper bag as she dug her feet into the water. If there was one sound I loved the most it was the ocean tides at night.

While Shepherd stayed near the shore carving a hole in the sand, a small pool forming, I rolled up my shorts and stepped into the ocean. From this close, the ships were much larger, and I wondered what we must have looked like from afar. I took small steps forward, splashing water with my hands and letting the water trickle down my hands. It was warmer than I expected. I continued to walk when I felt a slimy touch curl around my leg, I flinched, then laughed as the waves pulled the piece of seaweed away. Water rose to my knees and I could taste salt on my lips. It was a familiar feeling, the impatience of wanting to run against the water, even if it pushed back. I held my arms up for balance, the wind making everything cold as my shirt clung to my skin. I shivered and kept going, the water reaching up to my waist. I never went this far out alone. I turned to look back as Ma called my name, but a harsh whistling sound cast into the night and I froze. A sharp pop rang in my ears and I covered them. After a note, a twinkling, fiery dandelion expanded over the ships in trailing flames. The whistle and bangs reverberated across the sky. I remained anchored as waves sloshed up to my chest, watching the sky flicker with colors. When the sky returned to indigo, the ringing in my ear remained. Incessant. Loud. A cold crept along my back. The wind was dragging me further or was it the tides, I didn't know. I closed my eyes as a wave knocked me over. All sound seemed to disappear underneath the ocean waves. I found my hands on my chest. I could hear a heartbeat before it called out. Like Dad's. It thudded in my palms. Strange and unfolding. I thrusted my legs up against the sand below me. I gasped for air. I felt Ma's hand in mine. I opened my eyes. I forgot how large the night was beyond me. Ma was saying something to me, her face wet, and like all water, falling. But I couldn't hear her, my ears still ringing, my thoughts washed. When we reached the shore, Shepherd came up beside me with a conch in his hands. He always found the largest and shiniest, and I smiled as my eyes stung and blurred—from the ocean or my own, I couldn't tell.

On the shore, Ma wrapped me in a towel and covered my ears as the ringing slowly came to a stop. Ma wanted to leave, but I shook my head. I wanted to stay. Shepherd did too. So instead, Ma wrapped me in another towel and hugged me to keep me from shivering. Shepherd drew on the sand. My heart warmed. In that lull, she whispered words and stories, like how I had gone further than before—of course, scolding me to never do it again. And then a story about how to hold the moon. Ma smiled as she unwrapped the towel around me once I had dried up.

Like this, Ma said, stepping into the ocean. She formed her hands into a bowl, holding water in the lifelines of her palms, careful not to let the water slip in between her fingers. This is how you hold the moon. And she caught the pale fire of the night, frozen in the reflection of the tides. If you look closely, you'll see your faces, she said, failing to hide her smile. When we peered over, eyebrows raised, she tossed it into the air, the water turning into fiery stars. We laughed, splashing each other and letting the sea salt trail down our faces—each drop a burning wish.

For You, Ren Manuel

Looking Forward

Janna Pressman

Twelve 1

You understand that this will be difficult?

You understand that in this path you will devote yourself to all but may hold none dearer than the rest?

You understand that they will rely on you as they do on me?

And you understand that no matter what I will care both for and about you?

Then this is yours. You will secure our future by recalling our past. The foundation this is built upon is the understanding of distance and time. While the two may seem inextricably linked, this is far from the case. Rather, it is my job, and will be your job, to keep them connected. If you linger in place, time moves on, and Sun will catch us; his heat rapidly becomes unsurvivable if treated with inadequate caution. But just as lethal is rushing our passage, for everything we rely upon — food, and water — is stirred by the approach of Sun. You mustn't treat his power lightly, but neither can you let him stir fear in you, lest excessive caution keep us from the bounty his warmth provides.

Before you can keep time and distance together, you must first learn to track them. They connect clearly in one place and time when we meet the other tribes each year. That meeting marks one completed great-cycle, guided by the chase of Sun; but, it is such a large measure that it is imprecise. In order to make it there safely, you must begin to track our sleep-wake cycles, lesser-cycles. With the conclusion of each great-cycle, you will take a new cord, tie an extra great knot for another year you have lived, and begin counting the lesser-cycles once again; expect that there should be 350 lesser-cycles for each great-cycle. It is by learning landmarks and timing our lesser-cycles around them, and around the nearness of Sun, that you will connect time and distance. Start with twelve great knots, one for each great-cycle you have lived, and one lesser for this lesser-cycle. Tie them like this. From now on, you will tie one lesser knot when you wake, and a great knot when we meet the other tribes each great-cycle. This is how we begin.

Thirteen 84

You must move quickly through the spire trees. Walk early; walk long. Enter further into the dark so that the colors fade. Wake cold when the colors show in the sky; do not wait for Sun to warm you. You must face this hardship for fourteen lesser-cycles, until the cold bites. It is then that you will reach the river. You will travel against the subtle pull, along the bank of the river, and the water will become hurried as Sun approaches. When the river splits and its temper cools, you may safely cross. Do not be fooled into attempting the passage over the ice, or through the white water, as the water is strong, and the ice is thin. Wait for the split; cross it in parts. When you cross, maintain your rapid travel to match the faster chase of Sun and the fleeing dark. Worry not, for, with the strongest river crossed, the subtle pull will guide you back toward the meeting grounds when you need it to.

Fifteen 96

My heart feels heavy as I wake. The pink is showing in the East and we must move. As I tie the waking knot, I notice little branches sprouting from the rough trunks of the spire trees. Their tall forms are unique; some creatures live full lives among their roots. And, as the heat starts to reach them, the water within them thaws, allowing buds to form. It is a beautiful process to witness, their rapid growth of branches and leaves. Soon we may cut them for sap, but this early in our passage through their forest is not the time. Having only heard it explained twice, I try to conjure the important details of this part of our journey, but struggle with the task.

"'Nta?" Enda-Sul stirs beside me.

"It's time to walk, Enda."

"Did you rest well?"

"It's time to walk."

And so we rise, waking Lalta-Sul with us, then the tribe. They form around me, and we eat as I instruct the gatherers. Throughout, I try to spit out the tension in my throat, exhale the tightness in my chest.

"We must hurry now; prepare the foods we can eat as we travel and don't stray far. We will need our energy."

The forest stretches before us as we travel, slowly colder as we progress, and pickings are slim. This, at least, was expected, and the preparers have held onto carriable food as they knew to, as I reminded them, as I realized with scarcely time to plan. I didn't remember that I was to remind them of this; I just inferred that I should from what I did have time to learn. There was so much she had yet to teach me; how am I to proceed with no idea of that which I do not know?

Only the second lesser-cycle at this pace, and we leave flightful creatures where they can rest until the heat lifts them again, patiently awaiting the warmth of chasing Sun. The fifth cycle, and small creatures are better found through digging than tracking. The tenth cycle, and the trees have yet to sprout; the ground has shifted from mucky to crisp beneath us. The fifteenth, and the wide river stretches before us at last.

"The water is strong and the ice is thin," I murmur as her message returns. "The water is strong, the ice is thin." Louder I say, "we follow the river here."

As we walk, Enda-Sul approaches, expressing concern. "Do you need anything?" they ask. My face burns; I brush them off.

Twelve 2

We walk; I talk. You must listen and learn. You will have two groups of tasks to manage, social and practical. You must keep the tribe not just alive, but together. You must not see one couple or individual as more worth your time or affection than any other. All of this means avoiding favoritism; grow too close with some, and others will drift away. Whether you mean to or not, your actions have the power to bring them together or drive them apart; use that power wisely. Through repetition and practice, you will learn what to expect and how to handle that which you don't.

Fifteen 116

As we follow the river, we face away from the subtle pull. Traveling perpendicular to the path of Sun, he nears quickly now, rapidly covering the distance we worked so hard to gain. I only know some of the landmarks, and as we walk I find myself searching for any sort of sign, something I recognize, something she taught me. How can I project confidence when I have none? I don't know how fast we must travel and the young are tired, the old in pain.

Adi-Rel approaches me, asking for instructions for the gatherers. The ice has begun to thin, and the banks of the river have clearly been traveled recently. I remember this, but what does it mean for where we are? How close are we to the split? I count off the knots on my cord in a vain attempt to find clarity; I know we are supposed to cross in the 120th lesser-cycle. Adi-Rel says something to their partner as I count, but I can't make it out clearly. I only hear, "it was never like this."

Twelve 340

As we approach the subtle pull, Sun slows his chase of the dark and we have time to rest and meet one another. At this time, we may also take in or see off young adults; your reputation affects this. This is not the only time we may interact with other tribes, however. Finding others during travel is rare, but at times when the landscape limits paths, you will see signs that they have been. Gatherers may encounter one another; in my time this has happened twice.

Fifteen 121

The river finally splits as we approach exhaustion. The water is higher than I remember it ever being and, in apparent opposition to the world around us, I freeze. We are far too tired to cross it safely, but I know that as Sun approaches, rivers rise. I find my own panic rising with the water, and I know others can tell. They shoot me worried looks when they think I don't see them. It is my job to see them.

The longer we wait, the harder the passage will be. To calm the tribe, I attempt to clear myself of any outward expression of frustration, but I'm digging out an empty burrow; there is little strength to find.

"We stop here."

I hear murmurs but no one dissents. I wince at the thought, but what if I fail them? What if they abandon me? Everyone always used to gather around Mother during times of strife for stories or wisdom, guidance; but now they just talk amongst themselves.

I hear them whisper: "Do you recognize this place?"

"Will we have enough food?"

"Can she handle a crossing like this?"

"Poor girl; so young."

One child asks "Where Sinsan-'l? Sinsan come back?"

My eyes burn; I say nothing.

How long can her legacy sustain me through my shortfalls? We are tired and we are hungry. While food has become more available as Sun approaches, gathering takes energy and our pace has made proper work difficult. We are behind by multiple long rests worth of normal travel, and during this time of the great-cycle I know Sun speeds his chase. I remember Sun speeds his chase; she must've told me.

I am jolted from my thoughts by Enda-Sul approaching me. I have spent multiple long rests with them and Lalta-Sul, more than with any others, but mostly I sleep alone. I feel as empty as a dead spire tree, but it shouldn't matter, they all need me. It is my responsibility to stay with all of the tribe's couples over time, but there are expectations I'm not ready for. I should spend time with them all as I was taught, and I shouldn't be responsible for anything else, not yet. She told me it would be part of my job "when you become leader," but that wasn't expected for many great-cycles.

At times, Enda-Sul and Lalta-Sul treat me like they care about me personally, as if I were part of their couple. Lalta-Sul offers me food and affection; I take the food and ask for space. I need space if I am to stay composed. This rest, I sleep alone. I hardly sleep at all.

Fourteen 110

I'm fine. Focus on learning; I won't be around forever, you know. You won't freeze if you walk quickly, even as we hurry from Sun; our movement will keep us warm. You must not become too close with one individual or couple and neglect the others or the only thing you nurture will be discontent. You have me to be close with and someday you will have your own daughter to nurture, but my task is to help you become stable and independent. They will rely on you as they relied on me. As they rely on us.

Fifteen 122

We need to cross soon, but everyone is tired from missteps, and the time they cost us.

My missteps, the time I cost us. We need to cross soon but I am so, so tired, and crossing tired is deadly.

Twelve 89

Far from now, when I am gone, you will carry me with you in the lessons you learned, in the wisdom you've gained and I've given. You'll still have me with you.

Fourteen 120

Before the split, the water will be high. To cross safely you must travel up where there is enough time to swim, and not be caught in the depths of the waters joined together.

Fifteen 123

It is time to cross. I know it is time to cross. The water is higher than when we arrived, flowing with greater urgency as Sun approaches it.

"We cross the little river here. It is mostly wading," I say this for myself as much as them. "But we will travel up a little farther against the subtle pull before we swim the larger."

Fifteen 123

With the little river crossed, panic grips me further. I know what I must do. I don't know how to do it. Then Lalta-Sul takes my side, and I realize she was wrong. Everything I've been holding is suddenly too heavy to carry alone. Everything I've been holding was always too heavy to carry alone.

"What can help you through this?" they gently ask.

"I don't know."

"Do you miss her?"

"Of course I miss her; I feel like a piece of me was torn away. She was wrong. Or, not completely right. She said that I wouldn't be alone, because I would carry her with me…" I falter.

"Breathe," Enda lightly scolds. "And take your time."

And then, like a branch breaking away from its trunk, falling into nothing, trusting only that the ground will be there to catch it, the structure of my isolation which has been sustaining me gives way, and everything comes tumbling forth.

"What I didn't know, what she didn't say, is that she would take part of me with her. Sun caught up with her too soon, and I…I am so alone."

"But you don't have to be. Just as the rivers run stronger with each other, you guide us, but we help you move forward."

"She told me that if I get too close to anyone or any couple I'll lead the tribe to discontent."

"She did," Lalta agrees, "but you already told me she was wrong."

And so they hold me, and we swim.

There is Still Love to Look Forward To, Just As There is Love to Remember

Adella Mulawarman

sidewalk chalk sits on the driveway
and the grass is simply green
and though the sun sticks to my sides
without a breeze to quell its heat
i find my stomach rolling with soft laughter
soft joy, soft tenderness enveloped in
soft “i love you’s” into the ear of a child
filled with fresh love.
she dances with abundance
and cups me gently in her hands
we ignore the sweat on her skin, my face
eyes tight as my whispers turn to confessions,
apologies tumbling over themselves
for the grief i hold for this child who does not yet know of
the hate the world holds for her.
and yet—
and still! she steps into my shoes,
5 sizes too large,
and she hands me bandaids for my tears.
she tells me about her dreams instead.

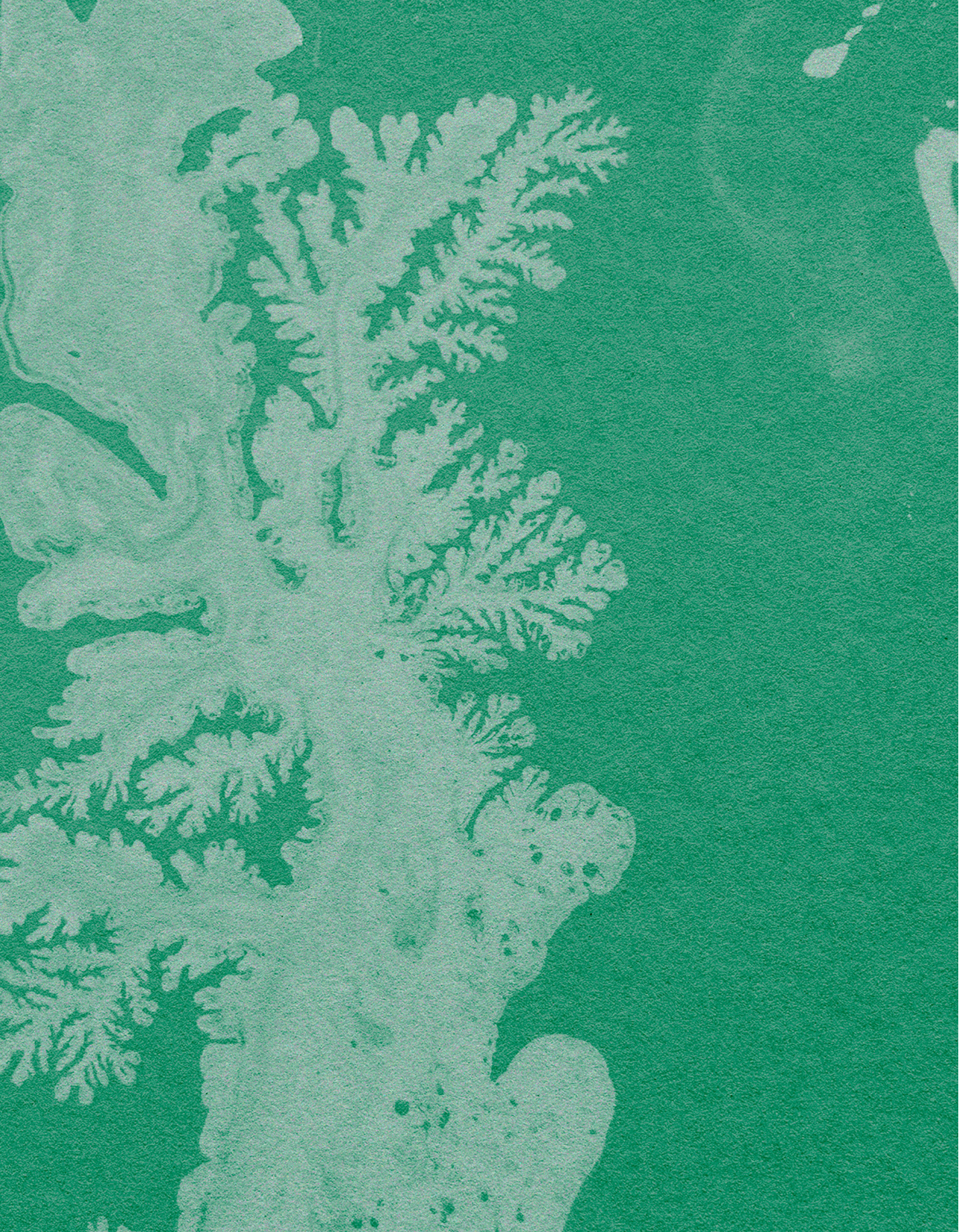
growing up in wisconsin

Chelsea Williams

my favorite color is the memory of my solitude as a child

deep blue fields in mid-july
my green understands

we could drive fifteen miles to the store or we could take the
ladder onto the roof and stare
into the green forever and ever and ever



Contributors

Adella Mulawarman is a current UMN freshman who holds a deep passion for literature, education, and vulnerable conversations. She hopes to utilize language as a vehicle for learning, connection, and change through the form of writing. If you resonate with Adella's writing more can be found at @_.soulstice.

Amital Shaver is a third-year student studying biology at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. She is interested in fire ecology, reading about food, saying things plainly, and all sorts of improvisation.

Andrea Bly studies accounting at the University of Minnesota Crookston. She is a farmer that loves expressing her creativity through writing, painting, and decorating cakes. In her free time, you'll find her lifting weights or outside soaking up as much sun as humanly possible.

Annie Russell-Pribnow is a queer, non-binary CLA undergrad set to graduate this spring with a math major, and has a passion for political organizing, particularly with the anti-war movement.

Asher Albera is a freshman at the University of Minnesota from Torino, Italy, double majoring in technical writing and advertising & public relations. He's currently writing his first novel and producing a short film, hoping to give a stronger voice to other Transgender people who have been historically silenced.

Ava Jax is a junior studying cultural studies & comparative literature and philosophy at the University of Minnesota. In their spare time, they like to run outdoors, cook with friends, and play Mario Kart Wii.

Bianca Llerena is a current student at the University of Minnesota studying journalism and english. Aside from listening to music very loudly and rereading her favorite books, Bianca writes poetry on insects, decay, nature, and love. *The Tower* published her work in their 2023 issue.

Boyu is a painter based in Minnesota whose creative journey is intricately intertwined with the delicate change between light and darkness in charcoal. It reflects the ebb and flow of life itself. She also loves the fluidity of watercolor and the heft of oil paint equally and plans to create large-scale oil paintings.

Chelsea Williams is a senior from Southeastern Wisconsin, studying political science and horticulture. In her free time, she likes to climb mountains and travel in her car. Her two favorite places are the rural Midwest and Sun Valley, Idaho.

Christian Ash is a senior at Gustavus Adolphus College majoring in financial economics and english. He was the recipient of the 1st place 2023 Lawrence Owen Prize for Fiction. His work has been published in *Blue Marble Review*, *Firethorne* Literary Journal, and *Kalied* Magazine.

Ciara Weber is a junior from Crystal Lake, Illinois, studying English and creative writing. She has a keen interest in book publication and archival studies.

Ekhlas, also known as Nafyar, is a BFA student in the Department of Art at the University of Minnesota with an anticipated graduation date of May 2024. Born in Atlanta, and raised in Minnesota, they are interested in post-colonial theory and media, particularly from Africa. Some of their other inspirations are Third Cinema, anti-colonial literature, and Sufi poetry.

Ella is a junior at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities studying sociology, global studies, and sustainable agriculture. They have a love for queer and magical realism poetry and want to thank their creative writing professors at the university for encouraging their writing.

Ella Leidy is an interdisciplinary artist based in St. Paul, Minnesota, currently pursing a BFA in art at the University of Minnesota. Her practice uses both sculpture and drawings on paper to explore themes of gender and sexuality through the lens of her own lived experiences in the rural Midwest.

Emily Riemer is a sophomore studying technical writing & communication. When she's not writing, she can often be found on the football field with the marching band as a clarinet player. She also loves gardening and tabletop roleplaying games. Her dream is to someday become a novelist.

Haley Schneider is a third-year linguistics major at UMN. She is an artist who works primarily with gouache and watercolor but sometimes dabbles in photography. She's pleased to be featured in this year's edition of *The Tower*.

Harper June is a poet and marine megafauna cognitive researcher who lives in Minneapolis. Through the whimsical and strange, she invites readers to step amidst childhood reverie and soar.

Isabella (any pronouns) is an undergraduate student studying acting at the University of Minnesota. Izzy is inspired by the origin of love (Greek myth), The Origin Of Love (Hedwig and the Angry Inch Song) and the origin of love (queer ancestry).

J Ryan is a creative writer and biology student at St. Catherine University. She grew up in Decorah, Iowa, on her parent's goat farm.

Janna E D Pressman (she/they) has been writing as long as she has known how and telling stories even longer. These days, they write a mix of fiction, poetry, and translation. Janna is an English major and a proud transfer student living in South Minneapolis with her dog.

Jennifer Chao is an artist and poet whose work reflects lingering desires for escape, exploring memory and personal struggles with purpose and truth.

Joe Petersdorf is a senior creative writing and media and cultural studies student at Macalester College. He splits his time between the Twin Cities and the San Francisco Bay Area. They are currently beginning work on a second book-length collection of poetry.

Kate Grace Mayo is a queer indigenous poet and writer living in Duluth, MN. Their work has appeared in *The Nemadji Review*, the Homegrown Poetry Showcase, and *Motherverse*. Kate is an undergraduate at UMD, pursuing a degree that will support their passion for community deathwork.

Kathryn Blommel currently attends the University of Minnesota studying fine art. Her art engages with notions of feminism that depict feminine adolescence and the entanglement of landscape and body. Her practice has been supported through grants from the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Central Minnesota Arts Board.

Keng Xiong is a fourth-year at the University of Minnesota studying English and an individualized studies program in creative writing, leadership, and Asian American studies, alongside an editing and publishing certificate. After graduating, he hopes to work in children's publishing and teach creative writing.

L. H. Cheung (she/they), English and computer science double major, has a passion for writing, coding, squeeing over fanfics, and whatever random pet projects her next hyperfixiation happens to be. They'd love to do cool and kind stuff with cool and kind people to make the world a cooler and kinder place.

Laszlo Jentes is a born-and-raised Chicagoan now studying sociology, international studies, and Arabic at Macalester College. In his spare time, he sings with an acapella group and the Macalester African Music Ensemble, explores the Twin Cities on his bike, and reads/writes poetry.

Lila Coval is fond of writing poetry, short stories, and the occasional novel, and their goal is to make LGBTQ+ characters and authors the norm. They hope to use their position as a writer to bring underrepresented voices to center stage and engage with perspectives they're unfamiliar with.

Mackenzie Conlin is from Fargo, North Dakota, and is studying film, with hopes to one day be a director. She enjoys reading, dancing, and spending quality time with her friends and family. Her greatest inspiration comes from her friends who are also writers. She owes her words to them.

Mahdi Khamseh is a future electrical engineer, physicist, and current poet from Minneapolis. He enjoys writing poems, writing songs on his guitar (performing with his band, Tin Whiskers!), watching French New Wave films, traveling around the world, and occasionally baking (assuming he doesn't burn his house down).

Marie is a third-year student studying biochemistry and Spanish at the University of Minnesota. In her free time, she runs *The Wake* Magazine and studies PFAS degradation. Art is her form of sanity.

Marie Valentine is an experimental, multimedia photographer who manipulates digital/analog photographs to reconfigure

her present narrative. Valentine attends the University of Minnesota, and graduates spring of 2024 with a BA in psychology. Apart from art, Valentine enjoys being with friends, being outdoors, laying in bed, fashion, and thinking existentially.

Marshall Douglas is an infinitely curious observer of life, particularly the trials and traumas that compel us to savor our best moments and lurch persistently forward—striving to realize some untold, redemptive future. Though Marshall is a basketball junkie, he's only truly crazy about his wife and two young children.

Martha LaBine's poetry has appeared in publications such as *The Rapids Review*, *Suspended*, and *Words of the Lamb*. In Spring of 2024, she will complete her creative writing certificate at Anoka-Ramsey Community College while continuing to work towards a Bachelor of Science in psychology at Bemidji State University.

Max Ridenour is an interdisciplinary artist, designer, and writer, based in the Twin Cities. They are a senior student at Hamline University majoring in graphic design with a minor in creative writing. Their work approaches themes of the surreal and grotesque as embodied by altered forms.

Morgan McFadden (she/her) is a recent graduate of the English department at the University of Minnesota and a fledgling writer. Currently, she finds a lot of inspiration in everyday life as well as out on the water.

Neva White is a fourth-year student studying agriculture and food business management at the University of Minnesota. Although their studies are unrelated to the arts, they enjoy writing poetry in their free time.

Niranjan Nayak is a sophomore at the University of Minnesota studying computer science. He enjoys reading, running, rock climbing, music, and writing, with a special place for short fiction.

Philip Toweh is a former Liberian refugee and a US Air force Veteran. He's in the college of Liberal Arts studying literature. He enjoys sitting down with a book and watching the rain while Nina Simone sings. When it's time for poetry, he enjoys Jean Toomer, Neruda, and himself.

Quinn McClurg (she/they) studies journalism and cultural studies & comparative literature at the University of Minnesota. She is interested in esoteric philosophy, all things "post-," and those progressive enough to be written out of history. She has additional works in *The Wake* and *The Furious Beautiful Review of Books*.

Rachel Maria Huberty is a junior at the University of Minnesota double majoring in history and political science. She has been writing for as long as she can remember and draws inspiration from her love of winter, everyday life, and anything by Rilke. She plans to become a social studies teacher.

Rachel Small is a third-year student studying English at the University of Minnesota with minors in creative writing and sustainability studies. Outside of school and writing, she coaches swimming, makes soup, and reads romance novels.

Ren Manuel is a senior at Carleton College with a double major in studio art and art history. They have been painting since 2022 and intend to pursue a career in the arts after graduation.

Sammi is a third-year student at the University of Minnesota studying cellular and organismal physiology with a minor in art. In her free time, she enjoys painting, sculpting, going to music concerts, and spending time with friends. She is so excited to have her first literary piece published in the 2024 edition of *The Tower*!

Seren Erden is a Minneapolis-based photographer and videographer. Her work mostly consists of portraits. Currently, she is working towards her BA in Art at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities with a focus on photography, videography, and film.

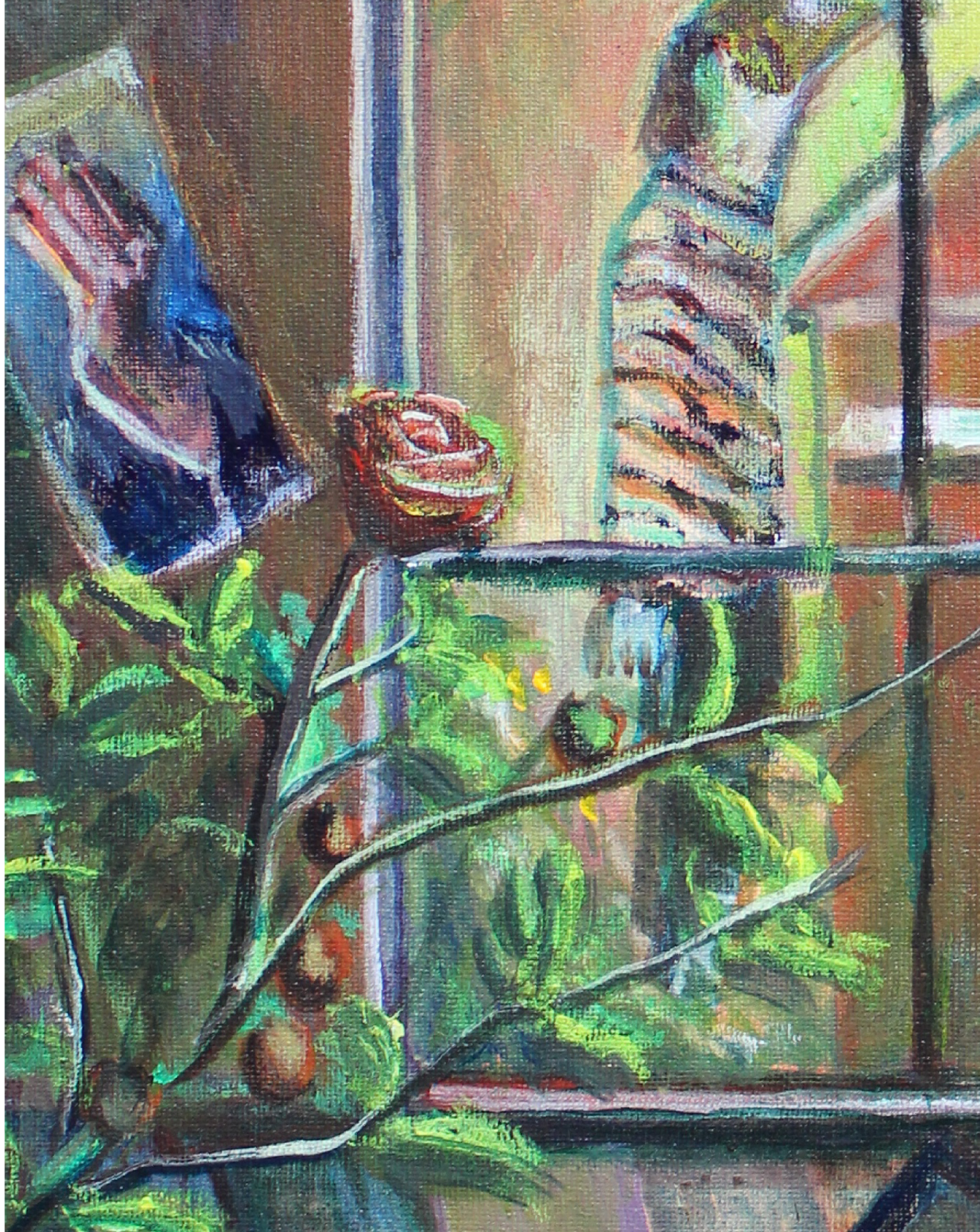
Sierra Kallio is a graduating senior at the University of Minnesota Morris. Utilizing elements of painting, sculpture, and bookmaking, the artist looks to represent one's internal world visually. Working from observation, she distorts objects through repetition and color, exaggerating the importance of the artist's hand.

Stella is a junior in CLA majoring in English and minoring in creative writing and theater. She most values narratives that surprise and inspire understanding. When she's not creating stories, Stella enjoys staring at portraits in art museums, walking aimlessly, excessive cappuccinos, and traveling to new places.

Theo Collette is a second-year theatre arts student at UMN from rural Minnesota. He fell in love with storytelling at an early age. He hopes to writes plays and comic books and is excited to work with *The Tower* this year.

Tong Liao, a junior student majoring in Computer Science, harbors a profound affection for street photography, endeavoring to present the commonplace elements of daily life from unexplored angles. He possesses a knack for discovering complex geometries, vibrant color schemes, and the interplay between light and shadow in urban landscapes.

Victor is completing his junior year in the University of Minnesota English BA program. He is primarily interested in fiction and poetry, with a secondary interest in publishing and editing. He currently resides in Robinsdale with his two cats and loving boyfriend.

Yvette Higgins is a freshman majoring in art and journalism. While new to photography, she has taken special interest in the medium. Much of her art focuses on childhood and memory, observing the world through young eyes.

Zoë Meyer is a graphic design student here at the U. They love illustration, typography ,and printmaking, and try to bring them into any design project they can. Outside of design, their artwork draws heavy inspiration from nature, zines, and books.